

CHAPTER 9

FOUNDING THE CHURCH IN TENNESSEE

Richard Pius Miles and Joseph Thomas Jarboe, astride their horses on a bright autumn day in October 1838, rode on, often in silence through the forested areas of Kentucky and Tennessee. They left St. Rose knowing there was no turning back. Both men, usually cheerful, showed uncharacteristic solemnity. The events of the past year weighed heavily upon them. Miles had scarcely been elected head of St. Joseph Province of friars when he was named Bishop of Nashville, Tennessee. Now Father Jarboe was accompanying him to his See almost as with one going to the guillotine.

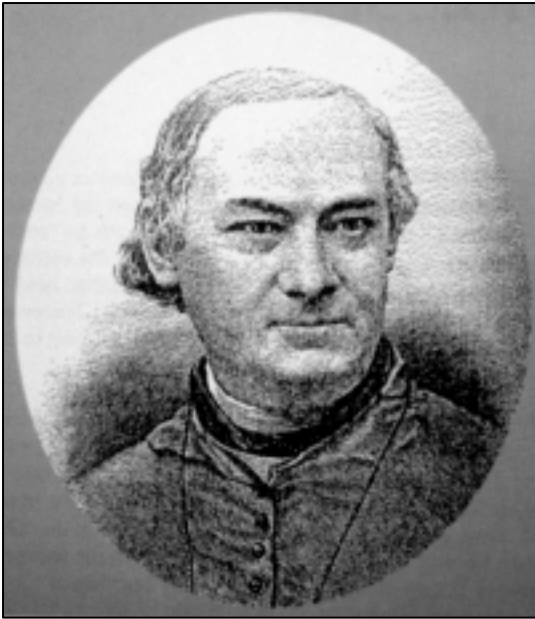
The disturbing news of Miles' episcopal appointment had reached the Dominican friars in October of 1837. It caused ambivalent feelings for all concerned. They were glad that one of their most capable brothers had been named to the bishopric of Tennessee, but sad because they were so desperately in need of every priest, in the Order. Miles himself had no mixed reaction. He was determined to accept the mitre only under formal precept. He believed his loss would be too hard on the province. ". . . I think there has been a strange blunder committed in my nomination ... to appoint a poor Religious, who cannot command one cent, in case he accepts, to a See where there is neither a church nor a clergyman nor any means, that I know of, to procure either."[\[1\]](#)

Nicholas Young, never one to hide his feelings, told Bishop John Purcell of Cincinnati that he could not agree that Miles should be appointed Bishop of Nashville. "He [Miles] can expect no blessing from Heaven when he knows the present situation of the friars in this country."[\[2\]](#) Even Thomas Cipolletti, Master of the Order in Rome, wrote to say he was "overcome by grief at learning that Fr. Miles has been appointed to the newly created See of Nashville."[\[3\]](#) He urged Miles himself to write to the Pope begging to be excused from accepting the post for the good of the Order. Miles had already notified the Archbishop of Baltimore that he did not intend to accept the bishopric in Tennessee without a clear command from Rome. He was further disturbed when his friend Bishop Purcell of Cincinnati, convinced that Miles should accept the nomination, wrote, "May God plentifully reward your humility & not impute to you as a fault your distrust of His Vocation!"[\[4\]](#) In August of 1838, the stressful uncertainty was dispelled. Miles received word that the Holy Father insisted that he accept the Diocese of Nashville as his See. He acquiesced and began to plan the transition from being head of St. Joseph Province to first Bishop of Tennessee.

Tennessee had become the sixteenth state of the Union in 1796, with Knoxville as the state capital and John Sevier its first governor. The growth of the state was slow; in 1838 it was still considered frontier territory. Among the settlers, Catholics represented a tiny percentage, even though railroad building attracted many Irish laborers in the 1820s. Since 1808 Tennessee had constituted part of the vast diocese of Bardstown under Bishop Flaget who sent missionaries from time to time to seek out Catholics. Stephen Badin journeyed there in 1808 and again in

1809 and 1810, but the veteran missionary reported finding very few members of the Church. Other early priests from Kentucky were Robert Abell, the first pastor at Nashville, and Elisha Durbin, who retained his residence in Kentucky but traveled to Tennessee at least once a year. It was Durbin who made preparations for the coming to Nashville of its first bishop.

Bishop Richard Miles, O.P., of Nashville



On September 16, 1838, in the absence of Flaget who was in Rome, Bishop Rosati of St. Louis performed the ceremonies in the Cathedral of Bardstown constituting Richard Pius Miles Bishop of Nashville. It had to be a day of tempered celebration for the friars, but one of joy to the few Catholics of Tennessee. Two weeks after his consecration, Miles and Jarboe traveled to Nashville. On November 10 Jarboe wrote that when they arrived in Nashville, they "took lodgings provided for us at the Washington Hotel, where the Bishop was soon visited by most of the Catholics of the place, as also by many of the citizens of other denominations who seemed pleased . . . and expressed a willingness to aid him in his many necessities."[\[5\]](#) Jarboe continued with words of praise for Father Durbin's preparations for the bishop. He had made repairs on the much-neglected cathedral, using \$125 of his own money to cover expenses. "It is but a just tribute to this

indefatigable missionary to state . . . that he has been the only priest that has visited the Catholics of Nashville for many years past . . . his praise is in all the churches."

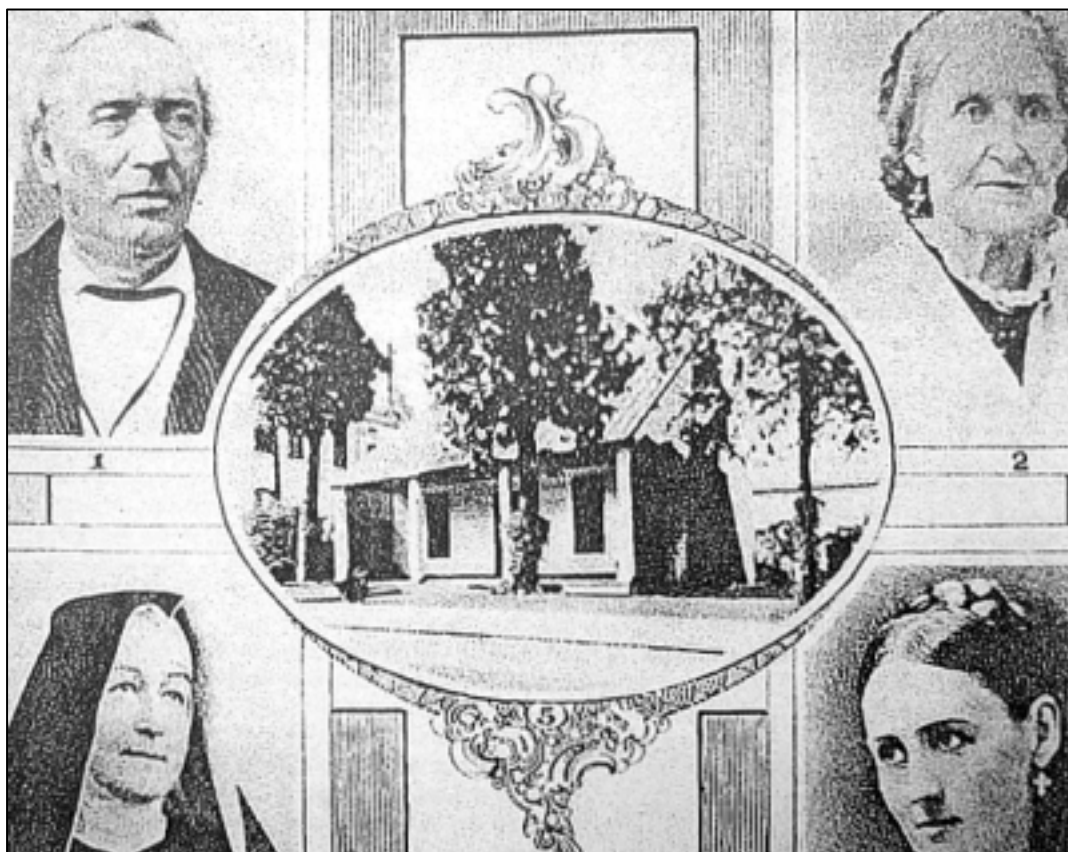
The hardy Tennessee pioneers were, no doubt, impressed with the physical appearance of the new bishop: his six-foot, large boned and well built frame, his hair to his shoulders, as was the custom of the day. His kindly expression must have been equally attractive. "He was deeply emotional yet rarely displayed this. He was even-tempered, stable, reassuring with a resonant and mellow voice."[\[6\]](#) When Miles and Durbin began a visitation of the new diocese Jarboe returned to St. Rose, leaving Miles for the first time in his religious life without a Dominican confrere nearby. On this first pastoral journey through a portion of the diocese, Bishop Miles and Durbin rode horseback, stopping especially to preach among the many small pockets of scattered Catholics. On their return, they calculated they had traveled five hundred miles and that the Catholic population of the state numbered around three hundred.[\[7\]](#)

Cincinnati, and William Clancy from Mobile. Other volunteers could not obtain *exeat*s, even from bishops who appeared to support Richard Miles. The movement in and out of the Diocese of Nashville, as well as other frontier sees, was epitomized by one missionary, D. A. Quinn:

Throughout this period priests come and go, appear and disappear, join an order and leave it, turn up in California and Texas, knowing that wherever they go their lot is loneliness and hardship. If they have homes, they are away from them more than in them; they rarely have churches."[\[8\]](#)

The first diocesan priest to offer his services in Tennessee was Joseph Stokes. He had served in the Diocese of Charleston before becoming rector of the seminary in Cincinnati. When he arrived in Nashville in September of 1839, he found Miles very ill with a respiratory infection. He stayed close to the bishop during his months of convalescence. When Miles was able to work again, he called upon Stokes to minister to the Catholics throughout the state and invite the wayward to return to the church. Stokes served in Tennessee for five years.

In the meantime, others had come to assist Miles. The second priest, William Clancy, was considered to be a maverick. His unique service was accompanying the bishop to Memphis for the first time, where he was appointed first resident pastor. There he officiated at the wedding of Eugene Magevney, a generous benefactor to the Church in Tennessee and to the Dominicans. Unfortunately, Clancy could not be induced to remain. Within a year of his coming, he left the diocese for another location in the South. William Morgan, the first man ordained for the Diocese of Nashville, joined the clergy of Tennessee at the same time as Michael McAleer in 1840. Morgan's ministry was cut short by death within a year of his arrival. McAleer served well for six years, many of them in Memphis, but was enticed to go to the more affluent diocese of New York in 1846.



The family of Eugene Magevney of Memphis; at bottom left, Sister Agnes, foundress of the Houston Dominicans

Miles could always count on the support of the bishops of Cincinnati and Bardstow. He also found a concerned fellow bishop in Anthony Blanc of New Orleans who had written to offer assistance. Not only did the Bishop of Nashville ask him for "good, zealous, active Priests," but he begged for money to repair the church and to buy vestments, chalices, a cloth antependium

and "a keg of pure wine for the altar."^[9] To convince Blanc of his great need, he described the situation in Tennessee:

I am consoled to find that some of my Brethren remember me in my lonely & destitute situation where I am left entirely alone to perform all the arduous duties of this hitherto cruelly neglected region & where so much aid is needed to repair the evils that have taken deep root among my poor deserted & scattered flock. I find Catholics in almost every part of the state, many of whom for many years neglected their duties & in many instances have lost their faith for want of some one to stir them up to a sense of religion: & what can a single individual do now on the verge of fifty amidst this general desolation? My great poverty deprives me of the means of offering a competent salary to a clergyman & in default of this I am doomed to struggle alone among the frightful difficulties of every species that surround me!

One solution that many United States bishops had resorted to from earliest times was a begging tour in Europe. In 1840 Miles decided to pursue that course. He spent eighteen months there, making fruitful contact with the French Society for the Propagation of the Faith and contacting seminaries to make his needs known. Upon his return he found that he still could not keep priests in his diocese beyond a few years.

Miles had not forgotten that the Dominican friars had built the Ohio Catholic Church under the leadership of Bishop Fenwick and Nicholas D. Young. He hoped that he and some of his brethren could do the same for Tennessee. While still in Europe in 1841 he wrote to Charles P. Montgomery, then Provincial at Somerset, asking that two Spanish priests who were serving in the United States at that time be sent to the Diocese of Nashville. With friars in Tennessee, he would be able to have some continuity in the various parishes in Nashville and Memphis. As a result of his request, the Spanish friar Joseph Alemany arrived in Nashville in 1842, the first Dominican priest assigned to that state.

St Peter parish church, Memphis



Joseph Sadoc Alemany was born on July 13, 1814. He entered the Order of Preachers in September of 1830; in 1831 he took vows as a member of the Aragon Province of the Order. After finishing theological studies, he was ordained in 1837. A few years later, he volunteered for missionary work and was sent to the United States in 1840.^[10] In 1845 Alemany moved from Nashville to Memphis where he became assistant to Father McAleer, the pastor of the fast-growing church of St. Peter's. That city numbered eight thousand inhabitants, of whom five hundred were Catholic.^[11] Alemany not only worked in the city but also rode out to do missionary work in the western part of the state. When McAleer left for New York in 1846 the parish was conducted by Dominicans Joseph Alemany and Thomas Grace. Alemany remained but a short time. Early in 1847 he assumed the role of Novice Master. In 1848 he was appointed Provincial, and in 1850

was named first Bishop of Monterey, California.

An event unique in Tennessee occurred in 1842. The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky, accepted the invitation of Bishop Miles to establish a school for girls in Nashville. Clad in their white bonnets and dress of the day, they arrived in August and shortly after opened their school. They were the first women religious to live in Tennessee, quite a phenomenon in a state unfamiliar with Catholic practices. The Catholic Advocate commented that the Protestants who were present for the sisters' reception appeared to be deeply interested in these women.[\[12\]](#)

In 1844 when the cornerstone was laid for the new cathedral in Nashville, one more Dominican friar arrived to assist Miles. Samuel Louis Montgomery was neither young nor unknown to the bishop. They had been in the first class of Dominican friars ordained at St. Rose in 1816. Montgomery had begged the Master of the Order over a period of two years to be allowed to go to live with Miles in Nashville. His reasons included unhappiness with the state of affairs at St. Rose and personal displeasure that his younger brother, Charles P. Montgomery, now provincial of the friars, was pressing him to take the pledge to abstain from alcoholic beverages. This the older Montgomery felt was a violation of conscience. Miles appointed him Vicar of the Diocese and finance officer for the bishop's household. He remained in Nashville for the rest of his life, even outliving Miles.

After seven years of arrivals and departures of diocesan priests, Miles knew he had to invite to his diocese a group of religious men who would assure continuity in the principal parishes. His first appeal early in 1844 went to Holy Cross Father Edward Sorin, founder of the University of Notre Dame. He wrote:

I have long wished to have some of the Brothers of St. Joseph [\[13\]](#) in my Diocese & am glad to indulge the hope that my wishes may be realized. Should it be possible to send me some please inform me in order that I may make preparations for them. I will cheerfully bear their traveling expenses & give the annual pension you demand.

He went on to a question raised by Sorin: would his men have to teach the girls? Miles replied:

With regard to the several questions proposed to me: ... I should prefer having the two sexes separated, yet where there are no means of teaching the girls separately, it would be hard to deprive them of the benefit of education for this cause and with strict vigilance on the part of teachers all the difficulties on this head might be obviated & might be taught in the same school with boys.[\[14\]](#)

There is no evidence that Sorin ever sent any men of his congregation to Nashville. Perhaps all his energies were concentrated by 1844 in establishing the University of Notre Dame. Or did he decline because he could not countenance his men teaching in a coeducational school?

Miles was not to be denied. Early in 1845 he offered a parish in Memphis to his own Dominican confreres of St. Joseph Province. To Joseph Jarboe, Prior at St. Rose, he wrote:

I have now at the command of the Order the best congregation & church in the Diocese whenever they may see proper to take possession of it, provided it be done soon... It is on the Mississippi in one of the best towns of the state.. .. I think it will not require much argument to convince the superiors of the order that the offer I make will be more advantageous than others that may have been made...[\[15\]](#)

He concluded by advising Jarboe not to lose the letter, and to answer soon. Otherwise he would be obliged to seek some other Order. The reply was affirmative and the deed to St. Peter's in Memphis was signed in 1847. The Dominican friars through the years realized Miles' dream of a large city parish with the assurance of pastoral stability. The feelings of good fortune were mutual. Miles had the continuity he sought, and the friars assumed responsibility for St. Peter's, a prosperous parish in a city with more Catholics than Nashville, the capital.

A Dominican friar who served with distinction was Italian-born James Aloysius Orengo, a volunteer who arrived in Nashville in 1848. He would be the epitome of Dominican missionary activity modeled on the zeal of Edward Fenwick. His tireless journeying throughout central Tennessee for the next twenty-five years qualified him as a true builder of the Church in Tennessee. His stay might have been cut short but for the efforts of Joseph Alemany, newly-appointed provincial of the American friars. The prior at St. Rose did not feel he could allow Orengo to continue missionary work that necessitated living outside one of the friars' convents. Alemany as provincial dispensed him from this provision and allowed him to remain in the Nashville area. "It is true," he wrote, 'that you might be very useful in Ohio or other places but on the other hand I think that Bp. Miles deserves far greater help than what we give him.'[\[16\]](#) Orengo's labors were such that "he went everywhere, knew everybody, and everybody seemed to know him."[\[17\]](#) He built many churches, cleared others from heavy debts and bought land for new parishes.

The 1849 epidemics of cholera and smallpox were more devastating in Memphis than in Nashville. James H. Clarkson, Dominican pastor of St. Peter's, ministered to the sick and dying. He himself became a victim of the disease in August of that year. Thomas Grace, O.P., succeeded him in pastoral duties.

Thomas Langdon Grace, born in South Carolina, attended the Athenaeum in Cincinnati and then joined the Order of Preachers, making his profession in 1831. He was sent to Rome to study, a unique privilege for American friars, and was ordained there in 1839. He held the post of professor and sub-prior at St. Rose, Kentucky, before assisting at St. Peter's in Memphis, where he became pastor in 1849. He was a friar of unusual energy and initiative. After ten years of generous service in the Memphis he loved, he accepted the office of Bishop of St. Paul, Minnesota.[\[18\]](#)

The decade of the forties was fraught with conflicts which sprang from nativism. Anti-Catholic prejudice abounded because the arriving Irish and many of the German immigrants were Catholics. Large numbers of Irish worked on the railroads and moved with the lengthening tracks, but many remained in the cities and competed for menial work. Despite these divisions in society, the work of the Church progressed. Bishop Miles seemed to be undisturbed by strife,

never complaining of anti-Catholic bias but only of the slow pace of completing his new cathedral that was taking three years to finish.

The activities that introduced the second half of the century seemed like a full-blown drama compared to those of the forties. Despite attacks by the growing Know-Nothing Party, the Tennessee Church vibrated with life. The new spirit stemmed from the vitality of Thomas Grace and his confreres and also of Dominican women who came to share the mission of the friars. The 1853 *Catholic Almanac* reported that of the nine priests helping Bishop Miles in Tennessee, five were Dominicans: Samuel Montgomery in Nashville, James Orengo in the center of the state, and Thomas Grace, John Cleary and John Albert Bokel in the Memphis area.

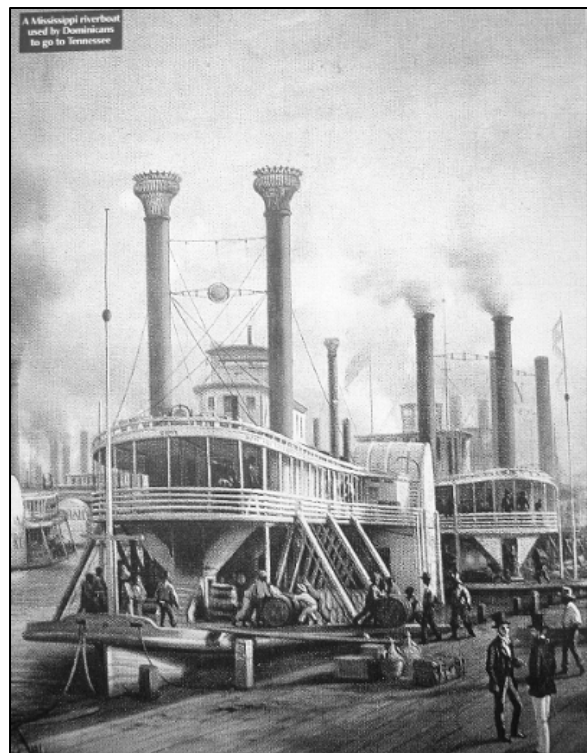
The year 1850 had scarcely begun when Charles Pius Montgomery declined a commission to be bishop of Monterey, California. None of his Dominican brethren had been able to refuse in the past. Montgomery's plea of declining health apparently was believed sufficient reason for him to refuse. To Samuel Eccleston's request for other suggested candidates, Miles replied:

I regret very much to learn from your late favour that Rev. Mr. Montgomery persists in his refusal of the appointment to the see of Monterey, as I have known him to be well fitted for that office; with regard to the Rev. Mr. Grace although a very worthy & efficient clergyman I think he is too young & has not been in orders long enough. This is the only objection that could be made against him. At your request I will take the liberty to propose . Joseph Alemany, O.P. who stands second on the list for Santa Fe & is sufficiently known for his piety & learning to render any recommendation on my part unnecessary...[\[19\]](#)

Alemany was in Rome to attend a Dominican General Chapter at the time the letter was written. There he was appointed as Bishop Monterey, California. When notified, he accepted.

In 1851 Thomas Grace welcomed to Memphis six Dominican sisters from Kentucky and Ohio. He had requested them from Matthew O'Brien, the new provincial, but had not expected so swift a response. The scene of their arrival is somewhat amusing in retrospect. Before preparations for their coming had been completed by Grace, the six sisters, escorted by Francis Cubero, O.P.,[\[20\]](#) knocked on the priory door shortly after midnight, January 1, 1851. They were travel-weary, having journeyed by steamboat down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers for four days. Eager for a good night's sleep, they awakened the pastor who was surprised and apologetic. Because there was no opportunity to find housing at that late hour, Father Grace managed to sustain conversation in his parlor throughout the night. No doubt, many heads nodded from sheer exhaustion.

A Mississippi riverboat



This first colony of Dominican sisters came to share in the mission by teaching. They included Ann Simpson, Lucy Harper and Vincentia Fitzpatrick from St. Catharine's, Kentucky, and Magdalen Clark, Emily Thorpe and Catherine McCormick from St. Mary's in Somerset. On the morning after they arrived the pastor at St. Peter's took them to "the spacious residence of Mr. William McKeon, where they were received with all . . . warmth and hospitality."[\[21\]](#) Here they stayed until January 10, when they took possession of their new home, St. Agnes Academy. The writer of their annals indicated that the sisters had 300 dollars from which to deduct travel expenses. "In Louisville they purchased a few pieces of furniture and some school books which left them a balance of 50 dollars to meet all the expenses of opening and furnishing a new convent and boarding school."[\[22\]](#)

The sisters were pleased with their new home situated about a mile from the center of the city. The convent and academy stood in the center of a beautiful grove of native forest trees on a plot of about five acres. The annalist recorded, "The Sisters opened their school on February 4 with 20 boarders and 15 or 20 day scholars." Even before the school year ended in 1851, enrollment at St. Agnes Academy had grown so rapidly that an additional structure was needed.

Besides the regular boarders, the staff at St. Agnes housed orphans whose numbers were growing rapidly because of deaths from epidemics. By December of 1851, the number of homeless children had outgrown their original quarters. A separate institution called St. Agnes Orphanage solved the problem. Here they were provided for until a suitable home could be found for them or they could become independent. Three years later the pastor bought land outside Memphis, christened it Gracewood and transferred the orphanage there. The sisters conducted special events like picnics and fairs to support this worthy ministry. Even the special projects proved insufficient. The annalist noted that it took the closest economy on the part of the sisters to support fourteen or thirty children, male and female. "Were it not for the farm belonging to St. Peters, which the Fathers kindly allowed them to cultivate and to retain the produce, not half the number of orphans could be supported."[\[23\]](#)

The phenomenal growth of the St. Agnes' mission coincided with an era of extraordinary mobility of Dominican women religious. Just as sisters came from the autonomous communities of Ohio and Kentucky to staff St. Agnes, so they were ready to return or remain in any other particular house to respond to the call of the mission. The annals of St. Agnes refer frequently to sisters coming back and forth to and from Ohio and Kentucky. They had made profession, after all, in the same Order of Preachers.

Another epidemic struck Memphis in 1855. This time it was yellow fever. The low-lying swamps that surrounded the city contained ideal breeding places for the mosquitoes that carried the disease. That factor, combined with the flow of traffic upstream from New Orleans where yellow fever frequently occurred, made Memphis residents vulnerable. A contemporary Dominican of St. Agnes Academy wrote:

The Sept. Session of '55 opened with rather a slender attendance, owing to the presence of yellow fever in the City. It made its appearance here the first time during the previous August. Although numbers were reported to have the disease, and many died; yet there was not so much as one inmate of the Acad sick for one hour all the time the

fever prevailed in the city. Most, if not all the city schools suspended during the panic created by the exaggerated accounts circulated through the county. Some half dozen of our pupils took fright in consequence and went home, but returned in Nov with a large increase of new scholars.[\[24\]](#)

John Cleary, O.P., was not so fortunate. His missionary activities out of Memphis along the Mississippi weakened him to the point that he could not resist the fever. He died in September 1855, the first Dominican friar, but not the last, to die of yellow fever in Tennessee.

In the waning years of the fifties, prosperity was evident along with change. The dedication of the new St. Peter's Church in 1858 was indicative of the parishioners' ability to support the construction of a new building. On a more somber note, symptoms indicated that bishop Miles was suffering from declining health. In this decade of growth in Tennessee, Bishop Miles had apparently made demands for personnel from the Superior of the Charity Sisters that could not be met. As a consequence, the sisters who came to Nashville in 1842 were recalled to Kentucky. Six of them wished to remain in Tennessee and this group became independent of the Nazareth mother-house. How well they succeeded after their separation surprised and pleased Bishop Martin Spalding of Louisville, who wrote to John B. Purcell of Cincinnati:

By the way, the Nazareth Sisters at Nashville have prospered beyond my anticipations. In going to the South I stopped two days with our brother of Nashville, [Miles] & visited the seceding branch, [of Sisters] which is getting on famously, having already twenty one members, of whom only three are the original 'bolters.' I was agreeably disappointed, & I began to think that "Secession" after all is not so bad. It is well that each Diocese should have a motherhouse & a novitiate.[\[25\]](#)

On a more serious note, Spalding continued:

I found Bishop Miles in very bad health. His cough is exceedingly troublesome & I much fear that he is not long for this world. He has sold his fine house & lot, & bought what he calls a 'rat-trap' near his cathedral. But he congratulates himself that he is at least out of debt.[\[26\]](#)

The health of Miles continued to decline to the point where he asked authorities in Rome to appoint a coadjutor bishop.

With the election of Joseph A. Kelly, O.P., as the new provincial of St. Joseph Province late in 1858, a series of events took place that involved the Dominicans in Tennessee. In January a group of Dominican sisters was assigned to Memphis from St. Catharine's, Kentucky. Sisters Helen Whelan, Mary Rose Rogers, Dominica Fitzpatrick, Marie Joseph Whelan, and Lucy Mills were accompanied there by Anthony Gangloff, O.P., and the provincial Kelly, also on his way to Tennessee. In his diary Kelly wrote, "We all took the car after dinner for Louisville, staid [sic] there a night and a day, went on board the *Southerner*, and glided down to Memphis safely and pleasantly."[\[27\]](#) On reaching their destination, he continued:

On awakening found myself at the Memphis bluff, it was so high that I looked in vain for the city. E Byrne came down to the boat, with him went up to the church. . . . The new church is really a magnificent affair, it is 150 feet long, 60 wide, transept eighty; it is plastered on the outside in imitation of stone. . . . The location of St. Agnes Academy is perhaps the most beautiful in the city; the buildings are ordinary, chiefly frame. Memphis is rapidly improving. . . . The streets are unpaved which is a great drawback. Thousands of bales of cotton are to be seen in all directions.[28]

After his visit the provincial made this entry, "It seems to me that Memphis is, beyond a doubt the finest place the order possesses in this country, and presents the best opening for future success. Once I did not think so but I am convinced of it now from ocular demonstration." [29] Far less constrained was the glowing remark of the annalist of St. Agnes Academy, "St. Agnes is emphatically the Gem of Memphis, the garden of Ten.[sic], the Eden of the inmates, the abode of the Muses and the consecrated spot around which cluster all the Memphian associations of beauty and poetry." [30]

Miles received a prompt response to his request for a coadjutor. On March 15, 1859, James Whelan, O.P., was appointed to succeed to the See of Nashville upon the death of Miles. At the same time Thomas Grace received papers naming him Bishop of St. Paul.[31] The Order's loss of these two men would be a hardship, but the honor to the friars would be beneficial, as Kelly's diary entry indicated: "Our order here may now fairly begin to look up. We are not as old fogeyish or as backwards as some suppose." However, on June 10 he noted, ". . . the taking of FF. Whelan and Grace leaves us in a very crippled condition."

James Whelan was born in Ireland but came to the United States early in life. His acquaintance with the St. Joseph Province was made through Nicholas Dominic Young, who so impressed him that he entered the Order at St. Rose, Kentucky, and made his profession there in 1840. Before his ordination on August 2, 1846, he lived at St. Rose, Kentucky and St. Joseph, Somerset, Ohio, where he pursued his studies and assisted in teaching the younger members of the Order. He was described by the provincial Regent of Studies as having "good talents, an extraordinary memory; but has a cold nature. Since he does not have companions to emulate, he is very difficult to arouse to make him take a lively interest in studies. . . . he would have profited greatly by the competition of fellow students." [32]

Whelan's record of holding responsible positions in the province demonstrated his outstanding talents. The Provincial Alemany appointed him Regent of Studies and shortly afterwards president of the new St. Joseph College near Somerset. He gave evidence of a fine mind and had a reputation as an outstanding preacher. In 1854, only eight years after ordination, the friars esteemed him highly enough to elect him provincial at age thirty-one. His choice as coadjutor to Miles appeared to be the high point in his exceptional career. In the cathedral of St. Louis, Archbishop Peter Kenrick consecrated Whelan on May 8, 1859. Miles remained too ill to attend the ceremony but installed his coadjutor in Nashville two weeks later.

The appointment of a coadjutor came none too soon for the ailing bishop. With the approach of winter his precarious health declined rapidly. The year 1860 opened with little hope of recovery. After receiving the rites of the Church, Miles died on February 21 at the episcopal

residence. He was interred under the high altar of the Cathedral. Many were the words of praise for this first Bishop of Nashville, who with a handful of priests had built the Church in Tennessee. Newspapers carried many accounts of his life and labors, but these words epitomize the Bishop's disposition that drew many persons closer to the practice of the Catholic faith: " Never morose, and seldom low-spirited, Bishop Miles had the happy faculty, in his social relations, to be able to impart to all around him a portion of his own cheerful spirit. He was pious without affectation, charitable to the poor, and kind and affable to all."[\[33\]](#)

James Whelan, now Bishop of Nashville, lost no time in bringing Dominican sisters to his episcopal city. In May he purchased an estate to be used for St. Cecilia's Academy and invited women from St. Mary's in Somerset, Ohio, to staff the school. Sisters Columba Dittoe, first superior of the house, Lucy Harper, Philomena McDonough and Frances Walsh arrived in August. They were accompanied tentatively by two Dominicans from the Heilig Kreuz Monastery in Regensburg, Bavaria, Maria Benedicta Bauer and Maria Thomasina Ginker.[\[34\]](#)

The Dominican women from Ohio opened their school on October 4, 1861, less than two months after their arrival. St. Cecilia's Female Academy, like that of St. Agnes in Memphis, boasted of attractive surroundings. "The ground selected for the site is one of the most lovely spots in this beautiful country. It is in the midst of a garden of roses, honeysuckles, magnolias, and other flowers."[\[35\]](#)

Bishop Whelan's role in St. Cecilia's establishment was described in his diocesan report in 1863:

There was great need of a Catholic institution for the education of young ladies somewhere in the vicinity of Nashville. After mature reflection and taking advice, I determined to establish such an institution for educational purposes in the vicinity of the City, a well enclosed lot of six acres known as Mount Vernon Garden about one mile north of the State house. Knowing that a first class Academy, such as only Catholic Sisters can conduct, would do an immensity of good, and be liberally supported, I spared no labor, no pains, no necessary expense to ensure the accomplishment of the undertaking. It soon became evident that my efforts would be crowned with success, and I am happy to be able to say, that St. Cecilia's Academy ... is now a permanent institution ... and has already secured the patronage of an extensive and wealthy portion of the country, where the Catholic system of education was not much appreciated.[\[36\]](#)

Whelan was delighted with the success of the academy because education had always been of major interest to him. Plans for the new facilities went forward until they had to be modified because of the war, whose approach Whelan and the sisters seemed to disregard in their correspondence. However, South Carolina's secession from the Union in late 1860 must have given a strong signal to the Nashville citizenry that a conflict was indeed possible and even imminent. Despite the apparent danger, the friars and sisters continued preaching and teaching even when federal troops appeared in the city.

The war years proved disastrous for James Whelan. He was compelled to resign his bishopric for reasons now unknown, but often referred to as the "case" or the "scandal." Early in 1862

Archbishop Peter Kenrick of St. Louis wrote Spalding of Louisville indicating that he was presenting "the case" of Whelan to Rome. He made no mention of any wrongdoing on the part of the Bishop of Nashville. Whelan's problems, whatever they were, must have been common knowledge to the bishops. In retrospect the closing remarks of Kenrick cast doubt upon the American bishops' nomination of the young friar:

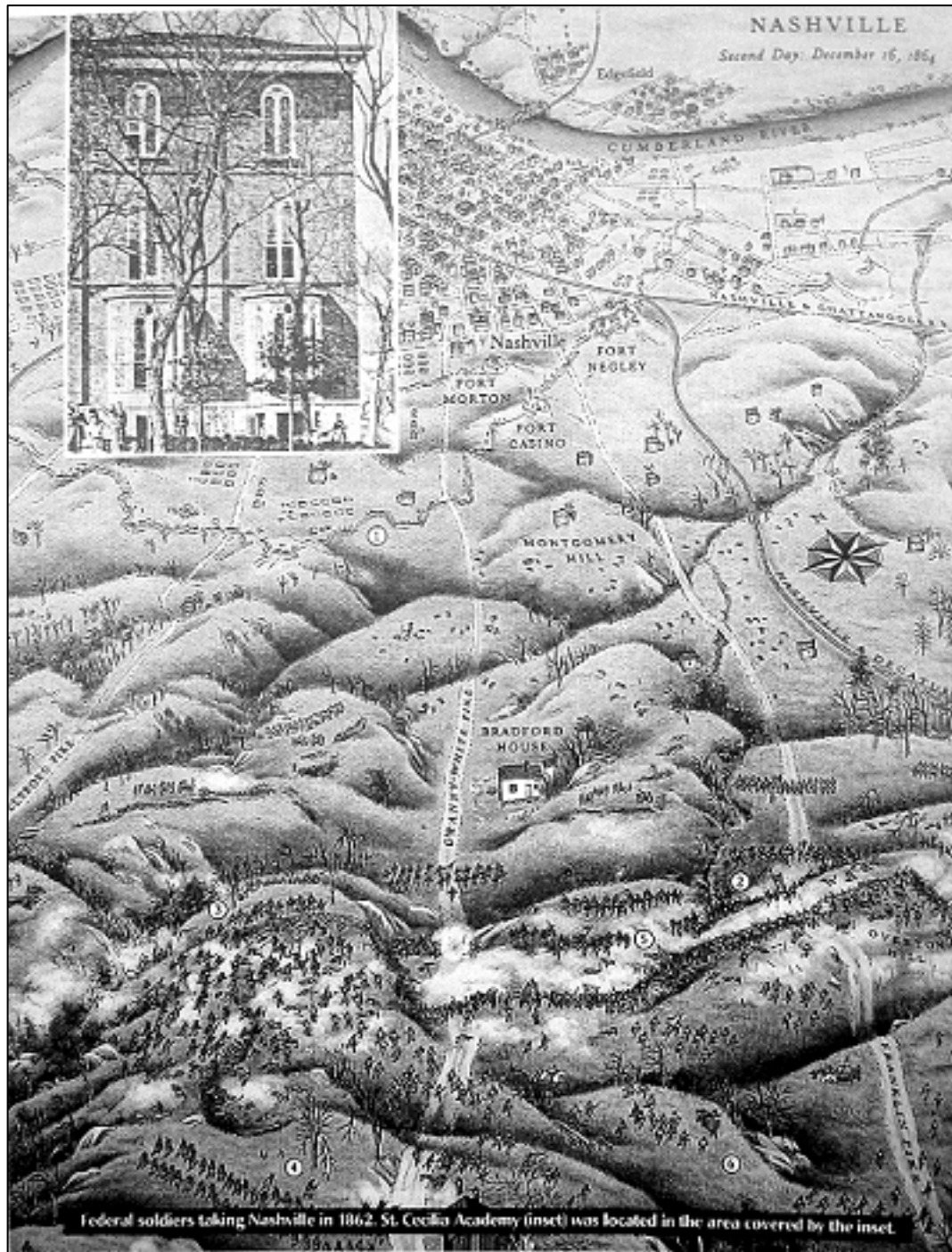
Whelan's name was last on the list and, having been provincial of his order appeared eligible. I do not think that I interfered in the appointment, otherwise than by withdrawing the first name We were influenced by the respect naturally felt for Bp Miles especially as he was choosing his coadjutor. No doubt the result of this unhappy nomination will be to render Propaganda still more than ever doubtful of our recommendations.[\[37\]](#)

About the same time, early in 1862, Nicholas D. Young wrote to Bishop Purcell, referring to an unnamed scandal concerning Whelan's behavior in a public tavern, but asked that the bishop not be suspended lest greater harm come to the Church.[\[38\]](#) Some conjectures concerning his resignation cited a "blunder" of more serious nature than insobriety[\[39\]](#) or fraternizing with Union officials in the city.[\[40\]](#)

Whatever his wrongdoing, Bishop Whelan felt constrained to apologize to Archbishop Peter Kenrick, Nicholas D. Young and also his confreres.[\[41\]](#) He notified the Archbishop of St. Louis that he had sent his resignation to the Holy See on August 15, 1862. On the same day Whelan wrote to Spalding:

I beg leave to state that I have written to the Most Rev. Archbishop of St. Louis informing him that I have complied with the purport of the communications I received from you a few days ago Nothing on my part shall be done to embarrass still more the unfortunate state of affairs. I must confess, however, that the present condition of home affairs, business and monetary matters; owing to the Political State of the country will necessarily cause me perplexity & unhappiness. . . will do all that I possibly can so that everything may be done as it should be and credit of the diocese not be impaired.[\[42\]](#)

Only in the correspondence between the archbishop and Propaganda Fide in Rome did Peter Kenrick state that the scandal was "excessive drinking in Nashville and in Cincinnati." Concerning the truth of this matter, there is no place for uncertainty, since he himself confessed to me through letters, and from face to face. . ."[\[43\]](#) Whelan felt keenly his deposition, as shown in his remark to Kenrick, "I submit to the severe but I presume just and necessary chastisement. . ." Until all decisions reached Rome and responses were received, Bishop Whelan continued to perform his episcopal duties as the war neared Nashville. When federal troops occupied the capital city, problems multiplied for all citizens. The *Freeman's Journal* reported arrests every day. Importers of goods had to take an oath of allegiance to the Union; retailers had to take an oath not to sell to rebels.[\[45\]](#) By the winter of 1862, the December issue of the *Journal* reported that all who were not loyal to the government of the United States must close their stores or be arrested and have their goods confiscated. All citizens appeared to be suffering from a shortage of fuel for their homes, especially the poor. Even lighting on streets and in homes was out for days at a time.



Federal soldiers taking Nashville in 1862. St. Cecilia Academy (inset) was located in the area covered by the inset.

Nevertheless, academies conducted by the sisters continued to operate and church services found Union Army personnel in attendance as well as parishioners. As a rule, the priests and sisters received no ill treatment to their persons from the occupying troops. But one Christmas Eve, several Federal soldiers demanded admittance to the St. Agnes Convent School. After some persuasion they left, but returned about 2:00 a.m. in greater numbers, insisting the door be opened. This time it was a man from the city who convinced the inebriated soldiers to leave the grounds. When Federal authorities heard of the incident, they stated that these soldiers had no

authorization whatever to cause this disturbance.[\[46\]](#) Although no personal harm came to the sisters or their charges, their horses were confiscated when needed by the soldiers.

On July 15, 1863, Bishop Whelan sent his final report on the diocese to Archbishop Peter Kenrick. His account of St. Cecilia's Academy indicated that the property was in the hands of the sisters. They owed the Bishop of Nashville, whoever it might be, \$2600. He continued,

It must be understood, that the breaking out of war in 1861, after the commencement of the new building, the blockade, the precarious state of the economy, the great price of things, etc. and the disturbed state of the society in general until this time, rendered the undertaking one of no small anxiety. We had commenced however, and were bound to persevere. Our school was never interrupted for more than about two weeks at the time of the great stampede in February, 1862.

The title of this place is perfect. It is secured from taxation and when society becomes a little more settled ... there will not be the least difficulty in paying off all the liabilities. No one contributed to the amount of one dollar towards the purchase of the grounds, or the erection of the buildings. The grounds, buildings, and property of St. Cecilia's Academy is estimated by competent judges of 30 years experience in such business to be at present \$70,000.[\[47\]](#)

Perhaps if given the choice the sisters would have preferred a more modest site and buildings. The debt must have seemed enormous, especially in war time.

Events moved rapidly for Whelan after his final report on the diocese. He left the episcopal residence in July 1863, but did not report to St. Joseph Priory until April 1866. There is evidence that he stayed with his mother in Nashville until he felt he could face his Dominican brethren. After his return to Ohio, he immersed himself in study and research. He published a pamphlet on evidence of papal infallibility.

On August 8, 1863, Joseph Kelly, having recently completed his tenure as provincial, became pastor at St. Peter's, Memphis. He announced to his congregation that Bishop Whelan had resigned and that he, Kelly, was assigned to Nashville as administrator of the diocese until a new bishop could be chosen. He thought his stay there would be brief, but he remained two years.[\[48\]](#)

Father Kelly, having first-hand knowledge of the successful work of the sisters in conducting an orphanage in Memphis, requested three Dominican Sisters to establish such an institution in Nashville. St. Mary's Orphanage became a reality on May 21, 1864, upon the arrival of Sisters Benven Sansbury, Josepha McGary, and Gertrude O'Meara from Somerset. With the growing number of war orphans, the boarding school did not lack occupants. Six weeks after the coming of the sisters, Gertrude O'Meara died of typhoid and was the first sister to be buried in St. Cecilia's cemetery.[\[49\]](#)

As the year wore on, the shelling around Nashville became ominously close. On December 1 Kelly recorded in his diary,

General Hood with the rebel army invaded Nashville. Got warning this evening that the Orphan Asylum was in danger from the batteries. Got five government wagons, an ambulance etc. some officers and citizens; ... we were all night engaged in moving the orphans, Sisters and their effects into the city. They are now in the basement of the cathedral.

As a consequence of the shelling, the orphanage was totally destroyed. Shortly after that, all churches were confiscated for use as hospitals. The priests and sisters continued to serve in the best way possible under the circumstances but were greatly relieved that hostilities would cease when they heard of Lee's surrender in April of 1865. Joseph Kelly had to remain as administrator of the diocese until November of that year when the appointment of Patrick Augustine Feehan as Bishop of Nashville became effective.

The Dominicans had worked long to build the Church in Tennessee and they would continue to do so with Bishop Feehan as head of the diocese. Despite post-war difficulties both the friars and sisters, moved forward in their desire to spread the Word. The federal government rebuilt St. Mary's Orphanage in Nashville after its destruction in late 1864. St. Cecilia's Academy recovered slowly from the effects of the debt inherited from Bishop Whelan. In Memphis St. Agnes Academy and the Orphanage connected with St. Peter's Church enjoyed renewed vigor with additional personnel sent from Ohio and Kentucky.

NOTES

1. Miles to Purcell, Somerset, Nov. 9, 1837, University of Notre Dame Archives (UNDA) II, 4 f.
2. N.D. Young to Purcell, Somerset, Dec. 31, 1837, UNDA II 4 f.
3. Cipolletti to N.D. Young, Rome, Jan. 2, 1838, St. Joseph Province Archives (SJP).
4. Purcell to Miles, Cincinnati, Mar. 1, 1838, SJP.
5. **Catholic Advocate**, Nov. 10, 1838, III, 316,
6. Thomas Stritch, **The Catholic Church in Tennessee** (Nashville: The Catholic Center, 1987) 47.
7. **Catholic Advocate**, Dec. 7, 1838.
8. D.A. Quinn as quoted in Stritch 38-39.
9. Miles to Blanc, Nashville, May 20, 1839, UNDA V 4 h.
10. In August of 1835, the Spanish government passed the Secularization Law that expelled the friars from their religious houses. John McGloin, **California's First Archbishop** (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964) 34.
11. McGloin 54.
12. **Catholic Advocate**, Sep. 15, 1842. This group of Sisters eventually left Tennessee and began the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kansas.
13. Until 1837 the Brothers of St. Joseph existed as a separate unit, but Basil Moreau united them with the Auxiliary Priests of LeMans in France under the name of the Congregation of the Holy Cross,
14. Miles to Sorin, Nashville, Apr. 9, 1844, UNDA, CSOR 2/11.
15. Miles to Jarboe, Nashville, Jan. 17, 1845, SJP.
16. Alemany to Orengo, Somerset, Dec. 26, 1848, SJP.
17. Stritch 120.
18. See O'Daniel, V. F., **The Father of the Church in Tennessee** (New York: Frederick Pustet Co., 1926) 550.
19. Miles to Samuel Eccleston, Nashville, Apr. 8, 1850, Archives, Archdiocese of Baltimore(AAB) 25 M 8.
20. Cubero accompanied Alemany to America in 1840 after their expulsion from Spain.
21. Author unknown, Annals of St. Agnes Academy commencing with the Foundation of the House, ms., Jan. 10, 1851, 1, SJP.
22. Annals, 3.

23. Annals, 8.
24. Annals, 9-10.
25. John B. Purcell became Bishop of Cincinnati in 1833 after the death of Edward Dominic Fenwick, O.P.
26. Spalding to Purcell, Louisville, Mar. 26, 1856, SJP.
27. Kelly Diary, III, Jan. 18, 1859, SJP.
28. Kelly Diary, III, Jan. 22, 1859.
29. Kelly Diary, Feb. 5, 1859.
30. Annals, 14.
31. Kelly Diary, III, Mar. 15, 1859.
32. Eugenio Pozzo, Somerset, Jan. 21, 1845, SJP.
33. **The Guardian**, Mar. 10, 1860. See O'Daniel 557.
34. These sisters wanted to serve immigrants from Bavaria, but could not raise sufficient funds from the small number of German-speaking residents in Nashville. They left in the spring of 1861. Rose Marie Masserano, O.P., **The Nashville Dominicans** (Roslyn Heights, New York: Roth Publishing, 1985) 2. The full story of Benedicta and Thomasina will be told in Chapter 15 and in a forthcoming history of the Racine Dominican Congregation by Suzanne Noffke, O.P.
35. "Charles" in **Freeman's Journal**, June 7, 1862.
36. Whelan to Peter Kenrick, Nashville, July 15, 1863, Diocese of Nashville Archives(DNA).
37. P. R. Kenrick to Spalding, St. Louis, Apr. 23, 1862, copy at SJP.
38. Young to Purcell, Kentucky, Feb. 10, 1862, UNDA 11 5 b.
39. Stritch 144.
40. The theory of O'Daniel in **The Dominican Province of Saint Joseph** (New York: Holy Name Society, 1942) 204.
41. See Whelan to Peter Kenrick, Louisville, Feb. 5, 1862, UNDA II 5 b; N.D. Young to Purcell (quoting from Whelan's letter), Kentucky, Feb. 10, 1862, UNDA II 5 b.
42. Whelan to Spalding, Nashville, August 15, 1862, Louisville Archdiocesan Archives (LVA).
43. Kenrick to Barnabo (PF), St. Louis, May 9, 1862, Archives, Propaganda Fide (APF) v. 992, 466rv-467rv.
45. June 7, 1862.
46. **Freeman's Journal**, Feb. 14, 1863.
47. Bishop James Whelan Report, July 15, 1863, DNA.
48. **Freeman's Journal**, Aug. 8, 1863.
49. Masserano 73.