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Early Times

By France Griggs Sloat

The westbound road into the Northwest Territory was no more than a trail worn smooth by the Indians when Col. Ebenezer Zane began slashing trees in 1796. He cleared a path from Wheeling, W.Va., southwest to Kentucky, creating the only road in the region when Ohio became a state in 1803. Just wide enough for hunters on horseback, Zane's Trace, as it was known, was the path followed when the farmers and land breakers from Germany and Ireland began streaming in with their wagons and wives and children, looking for a fresh start.

One was Jacob Dittoe, a German Catholic who settled in 1802 at Somerset in southeast Ohio, about two miles off the road. On a fall day in 1808, he took an axe into the forest and began chopping at the oak and hickory trees dotting his fertile land. The sound of the blade biting into the trunks echoed through the woods until it caught the ear of a lone man on horseback plodding on the road to Baltimore. His white robe draped over the back of his saddle, and a crucifix hung on his chest.

The man was Edward Dominic Fenwick, a Dominican priest recently sent from Maryland to Bardstown, Ky., and the only Catholic parish serving the settlers of Kentucky and the Northwest Territories of the Great Lakes. This was Fenwick's first trip into Ohio, and at the request of the U.S. bishop, John Carroll of Baltimore, he was looking for Dittoe.

Fenwick turned his horse toward the sound of the axe and found the farmer hard at work. His arrival became a celebration for the three families that had settled there—and a pivotal event for the eventual establishment of the Catholic church in Ohio. It led to construction of the state's first churches, appointment of Fenwick as Ohio's first bishop and erection of the territory's first Catholic university, which would become Xavier.

Fenwick's encounter with Dittoe and the Somerset settlement also marked the beginning of his life as a missionary to the growing number of Catholics in Ohio and the Northwest Territory. Dittoe had made several appeals to the bishop to send a priest and help his little settlement build a church. They had young people who wanted to marry and babies who needed baptizing. It had been years since the Catholic settlers had had the ministrations of a priest.

With Dittoe's people that day in 1808, Fenwick said the first official Mass in Ohio. By 1818, the Somerset families had built Ohio's first church on land Dittoe donated. The little log chapel had a dirt floor and a rough-hewn table of unpolished wood for an altar. A brazier of small coals at Fenwick's elbow helped keep the wine from freezing in winter.

Fenwick's life as a missionary suited him, but it bore little resemblance to his original plan schemed after graduating from the Dominican college and seminary in Bornhem, Belgium.

Son of a wealthy Maryland plantation family, Fenwick was taught early by the Jesuits and completed his education in Belgium. He wanted to bring the order home to the New World by establishing a Dominican community and college in Maryland.

Fenwick would eventually get his college, but it wouldn't be in Maryland, and it wouldn't be Dominican.

Assigned instead in 1805 to tend to the needier Catholics on the Kentucky frontier, Fenwick happily adopted the life of a missionary. He called himself "the itinerant preacher" and wrote about his solo travels to visit the settlers, when he often had to bed down for the night in the forest with his horse tied to a tree, his saddle for a pillow and "bears on all sides." After 1808, he visited many budding settlements in Ohio, including Chillicothe and Gallipolis.

He also began visiting Cincinnati, where in 1811 he most likely offered the first known Mass in the city to about 12 Catholic families gathered at the home of Michael Scott, an Irish Catholic architect and builder. "Scott was a generous supporter of Catholic activities. In his home he provided hospitality to missionaries on their visits to Cincinnati," writes Roger Fortin, Xavier's vice president for academic affairs, in his book *Faith and Action: A History of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati 1821-1996*.

The group's enthusiasm for Catholic life led to construction of the first Catholic church in Cincinnati, and the third in Ohio, on a lot at Liberty and Vine streets just outside the city. The simple plank frame church—55 feet by 30 feet—was completed in 1819, just in time for its first Mass on Easter Sunday, attended by 100 worshipers.

At the time, 250 to 300 Catholic families lived in the state, totaling about 3,000 people, all served by Fenwick and his Dominican nephew, Nicholas Young. The bishop of Bardstown began appealing to Rome to establish a diocese in Cincinnati, and on June 19, 1821, Fenwick was appointed bishop of Ohio. When the news arrived he tried to reject the assignment, Fortin writes. "Though Fenwick never became convinced that he had the qualifications for such an exalted position, he finally reconciled himself to the burden of the office." He once described himself as "the least worthy of men," Fortin writes. "This low opinion of himself was a consistent part of Fenwick's character throughout his tenure."

Fenwick's new diocese was widely scattered, rapidly growing and extremely poor. He raised scarcely enough money from his German and Irish congregation to pay his rent. Regardless, Fenwick decided the church had to be closer to its parishioners near the river, so he reconstructed the frame church on a lot he bought on credit and renamed it St. Peter in Chains Cathedral. Its basement served as a home to Fenwick and his clergy. The lot on Sycamore Street would serve the diocese until 1845 when a new cathedral was built nearby. The lot also would become Xavier University's first home in 1831.

But before Fenwick could build the college of his dreams, he had to find money. In October 1823, he met with the new pope, Leo XII, in Rome. Leo gave him two new priests, \$1,200 and religious supplies. Fenwick netted another \$10,000 and long-term financial support from wealthy European donors. Upon his return in 1825 he began building a new cathedral at the Sycamore site to replace the little frame church. The new Gothic-style church, completed in June 1826, included a seminary inside the original frame structure. But it lacked a professor, and Fenwick had to wait again for his college and seminary.

Fenwick's health suffered in the late 1820s, but the scarcity of priests meant he had to continue traveling. In 1826, he had nine priests in Ohio and four in Michigan. But the immigrants kept coming. Desperate, he opened a seminary in 1829 in the old frame church behind the cathedral. Named for St. Francis Xavier, one of the earliest Jesuits, it had 10 seminary students in its first class. In time, Catholic laymen began attending as well. Almost immediately, Fenwick began planning new buildings for the college and seminary. Donations helped him buy an adjacent lot and, on Oct. 17, 1831, the two-and-half story Athenaeum opened.

"Catholic secondary and higher education had their beginning in Cincinnati with the founding of the Athenaeum," Fortin writes. "It became the first Catholic institution of higher learning in the Northwest Territory."

Fenwick was pleased with the progress of his flourishing diocese, which now had 24 priests, 22 churches, a seminary, a college, a Catholic newspaper and upward of 25,000 Catholics—8,000 of them in Cincinnati. Just 14 years earlier, there were no churches and only himself to serve the state.

Death became a daily event in Cincinnati the following summer as the cholera epidemic took hold. Still, Fenwick headed for the territories, first touring Ohio, no doubt via Zane's Trace. On July 14 at Sault Sainte Marie, the cholera found Bishop Fenwick. Ignoring the chills and fever, he continued his travels, covering more than 2,000 miles. Weak and sick, he headed home with a companion and stopped at a Wooster, Ohio, inn on Sept. 25. As the sun reached its zenith on Sept. 27, 1832, Fenwick died. He was 64. There was no priest to attend him, and he was quickly buried for fear of the cholera spreading.

Despite his unheralded death, the college and seminary he founded remain permanent fixtures in Cincinnati. But the financial troubles dogged the diocese for years. In 1840, Fenwick's successor, Bishop John Baptist Purcell, frustrated by the lack of funds, offered the Athenaeum to the Jesuits who renamed it St. Xavier College. It remained downtown until it moved to the suburbs in 1919 and became Xavier University.

But the itinerant preacher who had ministered to thousands, who achieved so many of his goals, but who gave himself no credit, could not lie still for long. Five months after dying in Wooster, he was on the road again as his remains were placed in a vault under the cathedral in Cincinnati. He was moved again 15 years later when the new cathedral was built. Finally, in 1916, his remains came to rest in a mausoleum on Cincinnati's west side. Surrounded by no less than six Catholic churches in a neighborhood of Irish Catholics, the work of Ohio's first Catholic missionary was at last complete.

A Course in Religion

The course catalogs of Xavier's early days, when it was known as The Athenaeum and St. Xavier College, reflected the thinking of the times. Latin and Greek, poetry and rhetoric, chemistry, botany, mathematics, physics, geography, history and "mental and moral philosophy," plus all the European languages, were studied to great depth beginning in the 1830s.

But not religion. Though founded by a Catholic bishop and run since its earliest days by the Jesuits, Xavier didn't have a department of religion throughout the 19th century. In the 1830s,

when the city's Catholic population was still small and most of the students were Protestant, the college's administration offered chapel and Mass for its Catholic students and a religion-free curriculum for everyone. It wanted to attract the non-Catholic students who were needed to raise the educational level on the frontier as well as to pay the bills. It was hoped, however, that some of the school's Catholic influences would wear favorably on them.

The first religion class didn't appear until the time of the Civil War, specifically right after Charles Darwin published his *Origin of the Species* in 1859. The name of that first class was *Evidences of Religion*. It's listed in the 1863-1864 catalog.

The course name, says William Madges, chair of the department of theology, likely grew out of the reaction to Darwin's research, which, to some, was an affront to long-held religious beliefs.

"Darwin's views not only challenged the traditional view of humanity, that we were different from animals, they also challenged the Bible, which was understood literally, and the Christian idea of providence rather than natural selection," Madges says. "Where's the guiding hand of God in all this? This is the college's response."

Religion continued to be taught throughout the century. The course catalog from 1885-1886 lists religion in the philosophy curriculum. By 1905, mandated religion courses had crept onto the downtown campus. All Catholic students were required to take a Christian doctrine class, attend chapel and make an annual retreat. By 1920, the college had moved to the Avondale campus and *evidences of religion* had grown into a separate department offering eight courses. In 1930, it was called the department of religious evidences and offered 13 classes. In 1938, it was renamed the religion department, and all students, including non-Catholics, had to take religion. The banner year was 1952, when the catalog listed for the first time a theology department, though the curriculum didn't change. But the University emphasized that every course address the topic of religion.

The department's curriculum and staff have undergone many changes since then, but the discipline of theological studies has remained a major focus of the University. All students still take a specific number of theology courses, though they have a wider range of choices today.

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