

CHARLES PETTIT McILVAINE (1799-1873)

28th Bishop of the Episcopal Church



Charles Pettit McIlvaine was born January 18, 1799. The son of a New Jersey senator and nephew of a Pennsylvania governor graduated from Princeton University in 1816 at the top of his class. During McIlvaine's time at Princeton, an evangelical revival took hold of the campus resulting in McIlvaine's acceptance of the Christian faith. McIlvaine wrote, "It was powerful and pervading and fruitful ...the conversion of young men to God. In that precious season of the power of God my religious life began. I had heard before; I began then to know." Having attended an Episcopal parish while growing up, McIlvaine chose to join the Episcopal Church.

McIlvaine was ordained to the diaconate in 1820 and began preaching just outside the nation's capital in Georgetown. His reputation as an orator quickly drew many prominent leaders to his church on Sundays including Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun. Within three years, he was ordained a priest and elected chaplain to the U.S. Senate. In 1825, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun appointed McIlvaine chaplain to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. While at West Point, McIlvaine orchestrated the first-ever revival among students, an event not entirely sanctioned by Academy administration. Among those who came to faith under his ministry there was Leonidas Polk, who eventually became Bishop of Louisiana.

In 1827, McIlvaine accepted a call to St. Ann's, a prominent parish in Brooklyn Heights, New York, where he served until 1832 when he was called to the Diocese of Ohio as bishop and successor to the recently departed Philander Chase. Of his appointment, a reluctant McIlvaine wrote, ". . .great as the rebellion of my heart when the election first came, it is now passed. . . . Duty seems as plain as if I heard a voice from heaven. But it will call for great self-denial. The office is so responsible, untried, awful. The field is so new, vast and wild."

As bishop, McIlvaine also held the presidency of the Theological Seminary and Kenyon College

in Gambier. In that capacity, Mcllvaine finished projects left undone by Bishop Chase including the construction of Old Kenyon and Rosse Chapel. Mcllvaine traveled to England in 1835 to raise money for a new building to house the seminary, later built under his direction as Bexley Hall. Undoubtedly, Mcllvaine's largest accomplishment during his time as bishop was keeping the Theological Seminary and Kenyon College solvent during multiple financial crises. Mcllvaine worked tirelessly raising money to allow instruction to continue.

After living in Gambier for fourteen years, Mcllvaine chose to move to Cincinnati in 1846 leaving the day-to-day operations in the hands of a newly-appointed President of Kenyon College. Mcllvaine continued to play an important role in life at Gambier through the 1840s and 1850s, particularly securing financing for a new academic building, Ascension Hall, that ensured room for continued expansion.

Mcllvaine also began to play more prominent international roles as the United States headed into civil war in the 1860s. At the request of President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of State William H. Seward, Mcllvaine traveled to England as an unofficial emissary to convince the British not to recognize the seceding Southern states as an independent nation. His journey was successful, prompting the Archbishop of Canterbury, Charles Thomas Longley, to write upon Mcllvaine's departure for America, "Few men living have done so much to draw England and the United States together."

Following Mcllvaine's death in Italy in 1873, his body was returned to England where he lay in the chapel of Saint Faith at Westminster Abbey for four days. After a funeral service in England with many prominent English leaders, Mcllvaine returned home to America and eventually to Ohio where he was buried near his home in Clifton.