"Eat, and drink, and be merry":[1] A Clash Over the Opening of a Benedictine Brewery in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America

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Introduction

Beer, Catholicism, and monasticism are three things that the Benedictine Order brought with them as they permanently established themselves in America. The first Benedictines bent on erecting a monastery arrived in 1846, when German Benedictine Boniface Wimmer and his monks sailed from Europe to America. The following year, they founded the Saint Vincent Monastery in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, on still untamed and rough land.[2] Pope Pius IX (r. 1846-1878) raised Saint Vincent to an abbey, with Wimmer becoming its first abbot.[3] Pius's successor, Pope Leo XIII (r. 1878-1903), would further raise Saint Vincent to an archabbey, and Abbot Wimmer became Archabbot Wimmer.[4] Controversy and chaos plagued Saint Vincent's journey from pioneer monastery to archabbey. The foreign-born Wimmer and the Benedictine monks of Saint Vincent dealt with a country whose citizens viewed Catholicism with distrust and hostility, and an American-based church hierarchy that sought assimilation into American culture. An issue that arose and took prominence in the early history of Saint Vincent was the controversy surrounding the monks' plan for establishing a brewery, which church temperance activists fiercely opposed. The brewery controversy exemplifies how the roles of Wimmer's and his monks' German cultural identity and Catholic religious beliefs clashed with American temperance progressive activism, and shows the complexities of the hierarchy and patronage system which supported Benedictine American communal societies in the nineteenth century.

The Benedictines in America

In 1790, the Church came into possession of Sportsman's Hall, the property where Wimmer would establish the Saint Vincent monastery.[5] In 1843, Pope Gregory XVI (r. 1831-1846) erected the Diocese of Pittsburgh, which included the Sportsman's Hall tract.[6] Gregory appointed Michael O'Connor (r. 1843-1853 & 1854-1860) as the first Bishop of Pittsburgh, a young and progressive rising star in the American Catholic hierarchy.

Despite his Irish Catholic origins, he was a strong advocate for the temperance movement. By the time of the diocese's erection, a small parish had emerged on Sportsman's Hall. O'Connor, early in his episcopacy, founded a seminary close to the Sportsman's Hall parish.[7] O'Connor also sought to satisfy the spiritual needs of his diocese's laity, which included a growing population of German immigrants.

Many Germans flocked to the land that composed the Diocese of Pittsburgh. The diocese enjoyed rich agricultural land, which Germans sought to farm and cultivate. Many of these Germans were Catholic, and spoke very little, if any, English. The German Catholic settlers desperately desired German priests who understood their language and customs.[8] O'Connor, understanding the Germans' needs in his diocese, began searching for a German priest who could establish a parish to tend to the Germans' spiritual needs. O'Connor tasked Peter Lemke, a German Catholic in his diocese with connections to the church hierarchy in Germany, to find a suitable candidate to run a parish for the Germans.[9] O'Connor and Lemke would not have to wait long. Across the Atlantic Ocean, the Bavarian Benedictine monk and priest, Boniface Wimmer, began making plans to establish a Benedictine mission in America, following an invitation from Lemke.[10]

Boniface Wimmer

Rome soon gave its approval for Wimmer to establish the mission for the Germans, and Wimmer and a group of Benedictine monks arrived at Sportsman's Hall in the autumn of 1846. They took over the facilities present on the property and established the Benedictine Monastery of Saint Vincent.[11] With O'Connor's sanction, he founded a parish for the diocese's Germans. Wimmer quickly developed the property, establishing a monastic residence, a church, farms, and mills. Wimmer envisioned that Saint Vincent would become like medieval German Benedictine monasteries, which served the "villages, towns and cities [which] sprang up near Benedictine abbeys."[12] However, Wimmer's community lacked one key feature if he wanted to serve Germans: a brewery. Brewing and the consumption of beer had an important place in German culture, and Wimmer's German Benedictine predecessors had brewed beer for centuries: "Since the Middle Ages German monasteries had operated breweries not only to generate income but also to supply monastery tables with beer. As a good German, Wimmer saw no difficulty with Benedictines being involved in the beer trade."[13] Wimmer wanted to provide beer to meet the needs and tastes of the German diaspora in America. Wimmer himself was the son of a tavernkeeper.[14] Beer proved indispensable, as it provided an alternative to water which could carry disease, and selling it could provide much needed funds for the monks. Wimmer would not have to wait long for a brewery, as he acquired one in 1851 from his nephew.[15] Wimmer faced opposition from O'Connor, however, as the latter sought to foster temperance in his diocese.

Saint Vincent and American Catholic Monasticism in the Nineteenth Century

Wimmer and the Benedictine monks who founded Saint Vincent immersed themselves in a rich historical and spiritual tradition with roots stretching back deep into the Old World, and only now flourishing in the fertile New World of America. Other Catholic monks, beyond Wimmer and his monks, established missions in America.[16] Across the country, Augustinians, Dominicans, Franciscans, Marianists, and Trappists all founded monastic communities.[17] Wimer and his monks were not even the only Benedictines erecting monasteries in America, as Father Martin Marty led a group of Swiss Benedictine monks to establish the monastery of Saint Meinrad in Indiana in 1854.[18] A unique aspect about Catholic monasticism, in America or across the world, was that its duty was not to present a model for the

wider society of fallen humanity to follow; rather, monastics saw themselves as filling a distinct niche in society by providing prayer, penance, and the sacraments. Catholic monasticism is itself a tradition stretching back into the Roman Empire. Catholic monasticism's ancient nature allowed it to become very well organized and highly structured, with the Holy See in command, the monastic order following, and at the bottom, the monastery itself. Monks served as a "secular 'official' clergy," not just worshiping and managing their community's affairs, but also administering a parish and cooperating with those in higher clerical positions.[19] Other Protestant and other Christian denominational communities lacked an analogous structure. Roman Catholic monasteries, including Saint Vincent, found themselves a part of complex hierarchical and patronage networks that included the monastic orders themselves, bishops, political leaders, and the pope.

An Incompetent Nephew

Wimmer's nephew had immigrated into the United States, moving to Indiana. In Indiana, his nephew was a continual embarrassment. He got himself into unwise business ventures that he bungled, such as a brewery. Wimmer recounts how he eventually gained control of the brewery:

> A nephew of mine, who was supposed to bring me money, embezzled 1,000 florins. Since he no longer had it, I could not get it from him. He bought a brewery in the expectation of a good marriage. It fell through. I loaned him money in order to make it possible for him to pay the 1,000 florins or be able to pay it myself. Since he again displayed an inclination to seek his own advantage rather than mine, I threw him off the premises and kept the brewery for myself. As a precaution, I had the bill of sale made out to me.[20]

Wimmer clearly desired to maintain familial bonds, despite great geographical separation from Germany and vast tracts of wilderness separating him and his nephew. The goodness of his heart inspired him to aid his nephew even after he embezzled his money. Wimmer forgave him and still continued to assist him. But, despite this one final chance, his nephew again misused Wimmer's funds. In response, Wimmer seized

the brewery, claiming ownership, since the bill of sale was in his name. Wimmer thought to brew and sell beer to cover some of the costs of their mission in America. Wimmer "assigned one priest and four brothers to Indiana," where they would brew beer and operate a tavern on the site. He was "heavily in debt"[21] from the financial fallout of the brewery fiasco with his nephew, and this new mission would help to pay off this debt and other arrears he had accumulated. While Wimmer moved forward in his plans to establish a brewery, he ran into opposition from his bishop, Michael O'Connor, who sought to use his powers as bishop to shut down the brewery and thus advance the causes of temperance.

Bishop Michael O'Connor.
Wikimedia Commons.

A Temperate Bishop

Bishop O'Connor was an outlier in the temperance movement; he was an immigrant, Irish, and Catholic, in a movement which virulently anti-Catholic nativist Protestants dominated. Nonetheless, he persevered and remained an ardent temperance advocate, promoting temperance in his diocese. O'Connor invited the prominent Irish temperate activist and reformer Father Theobald Mathew into his diocese to put an end to the "drink-evil"[22] afflicting the faithful. O'Connor had even gone so far as to publicly swear a pledge in his own cathedral to abstain from alcohol.[23] Thus, when Wimmer planned on opening a brewery, O'Connor endeavored to stop him. O'Connor believed that it was well within his rights as Wimmer's bishop. O'Connor and Wimmer had a previous cordial relationship before the brewery controversy, and would continue to do so after, but at this time they butted heads as O'Connors activism clashed with Wimmer's cultural and religious sentiments. Initially, O'Connor simply demanded that Wimmer stop all brewing operations. When Wimmer refused, both men agreed to reach out to the Holy See to resolve the controversy.[24]

O'Connor wrote to the Propaganda Fide in the Holy See. He noted that the murkiness of who oversaw Saint Vincent placed O'Connor in a supervisory position over its affairs until it could become an independent abbey, and stated his objection to alcohol, acknowledging its evil and drunkenness as a mortal sin.[25] He convinced the influential Archbishop Gaetano Bedini of the Propaganda Fide to support his case in the Holy See.[26] In addition to the Propaganda Fide, O'Connor also educed his ally Tobias Kirby, the Rector of the Roman Pontifical Irish College, to advocate for him on his behalf to the Holy See, writing: "I had thus a nice kettle of fish, a scandalous priest on one side in one tavern, and at the other end of the town a tavern in full blast kept by the superior of a religious order [Wimmer]."[27] O'Connor feared that Wimmer's priests and monks, under his ecclesiastical supervision, would sell beer and open tavern establishments, encouraging drunkenness and alcohol consumption. Such immoderate behavior would go against his beliefs. He used his connections to do everything in his power to convince the Holy See to force the brewery's closure. Meanwhile, Wimmer had been at work, using his extensive European connections to ensure he emerged victorious in the brewing controversy.

King Ludwig I of Bavaria, painted by Joseph Stieler, 1825.
Webb Gallery of Art, Wikimedia Commons.

The King of Bavaria

Wimmer maintained an extensive network which included royalty. He maintained good relations with King Ludwig I of Bavaria (r. 1825-1848), who sponsored Saint Vincent, bequeathing it "2,000 florins ($1,000) annually for twenty years."[28] Wimmer also had good relations with Ludwig's successor and son, King Maximilian II (r. 1848-1864), following Ludwig's abdication. Ludwig, and to a lesser extent Maximilian, faithfully adhered to Catholicism and sought to patronize and support the Bavarian Church, both domestically and abroad. Therefore, they were more than happy to support Wimmer and the Benedictine monks of Saint Vincent, as Wimmer came from a Bavarian village. In return, Wimmer had to ensure that he developed the monastery and provided care for the Germans under his pastorship. Wimmer gave thorough reports to the monarchs, even sending them a detailed and accurate sketch of Saint Vincent in 1851, which accompanied a letter where he noted that he hoped "[his] monastery [proved] to be a powerful support, not only for religion, but also for German learning, art, and language."[29] They eagerly provided Wimmer with support during the brewery controversy, and as royalty, used their connections to convince the Holy See to rule in Wimmer's favor.

Despite Ludwig's abdication, he still remained an influential and well-connected figure, and Wimmer chiefly used him as his contact in the Bavarian royal family during the brewery controversy. Wimmer traveled to Europe to advocate in person for the brewery. He arrived in Munich, where he began a dialogue with Ludwig. He not only convinced Ludwig to support his side in the brewery controversy, he also persuaded him to lobby the Holy See to raise Saint Vincent's status as an abbey, which would make Wimmer independent of O'Connor and any future bishop. Wimmer enthralled Ludwig, and he gifted Wimmer an ostensorium and rare books from his own personal library. Such fruitful discourses resulted in Ludwig writing this letter in support of Wimmer:

> His Holiness would not object to the elevation of St. Vincent, since it is the wish of His Majesty, but at present, an obstacle stands in the way for fulfilling His wishes. The Bishop of Pittsburgh will not consent that the Bavarian Benedictines at Mount Vincent build a brewery, but the Superior is insisting on that. For this reason, the Bishop did not execute the papal rescript of the canonical erection of that monastery.[30]

Ludwig gave this letter to Graf von Spaur, the Bavarian ambassador to the Holy See, who presented it to the Propaganda Fide and the pope as they lobbied for Wimmer.[31]
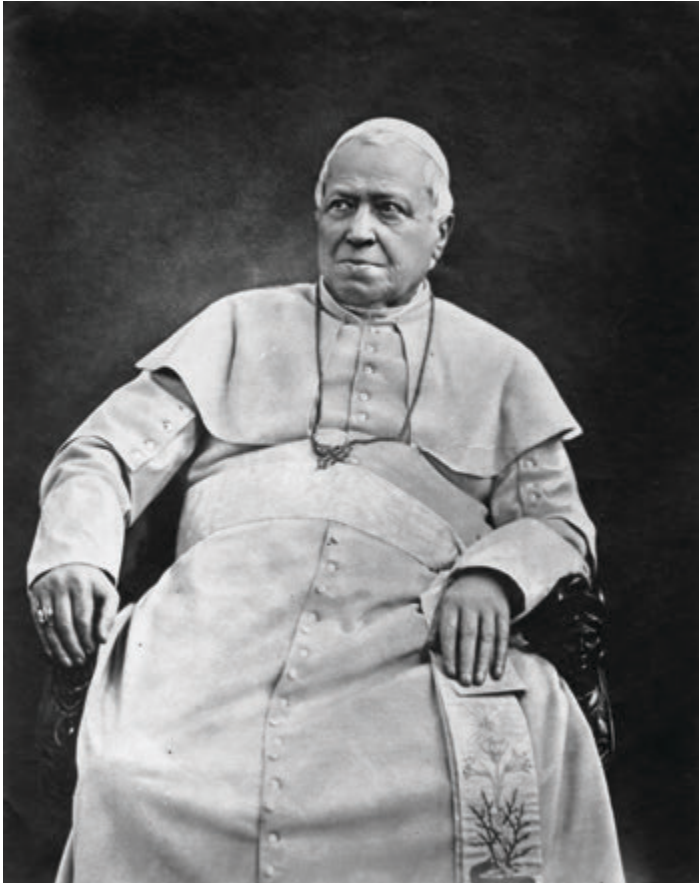
Pope Pius IX, photographed by Adolphe Braun.
Wikimedia Commons.

Dealings with the Pope

Pope Blessed Pius IX occupied the Chair of Saint Peter at the time of the brewery controversy. O'Connor's and Wimmer's arguments worked their way through their allies and patrons and the enormous papal bureaucracy. Eventually, Pius dealt with the affair. Pius decided in favor of Wimmer, allowing Wimmer to establish a brewery. Additionally, he elevated Saint

Vincent to an abbey, making the monastery independent of O'Connor and raising Wimmer to an abbot. Pius directed his secretary, Archbishop Giacomo Fransoni, to write his decision in a letter circulated to Ludwig, O'Connor, Wimmer, and all other interested parties involved in the controversy:

> After mature deliberation it was decided that the decree which had been passed in 1848, about the canonical establishment of the monastery, should be executed. Concerning the brewery, proper instructions were given that the monks may not be wanting the necessary means of sustenance, but that this concession be carried out in accordance with ecclesisatical laws … the Eminences … believe it best that the elevation of the monastery be granted in due time.[32]

Pius's decision disappointed O'Connor, but he remained loyal to the Holy See's judgment, not attempting to prevent Wimmer from establishing a brewery or Saint Vincent's newly-raised status as an abbey.[33] The decision overjoyed Wimmer, who could now brew beer for his monks and his German laity, while expanding Benedictine missions across the United States with his authority as an abbot. Wimmer's influence would only grow over the next three decades. He eventually became the United States' first archabbot in 1883, after Pope Leo XIII raised Saint Vincent to an archabbey.

Ironically, the Hoosier brewery that Wimmer had fought so hard to keep open proved financially insolvent and closed in 1851, before the Holy See's decision.[34] Wimmer noted while "Rome decided in my favor … the privilege is too late for Indiana."[35] Ultimately though, the controversy was never just about this specific brewery. Rather, it was about whether Wimmer and his monks could exercise control over their own community and express their religious and cultural customs. Saint Vincent would eventually get its own onsite brewery. Wimmer wrote to Ludwig in 1860 that "on Christmas, we shall for the first time drink our own beer."[36] Later, during Wimmer's stay in Rome during the First Vatican Council, he had a papal audience with Pius. Pius and Wimmer had the following exchange regarding the controversy:

"Holy Father, you have good saying about your Benedictines brewing and selling beer; but you forgot that we don't drink any these nine years, and that we have no brewery." "Germans and not drinking beer," he replied, "that is much." "Yes, indeed," I said, "until now we could do so, being young; but when we grow older, we will probably be in necessity to make beer."[37]

Their exchange demonstrates how the whole controversy boiled down to Wimmer's cultural and religious identity as a German Benedictine. Pius and Wimmer jokingly discussed German cultural and religious identity, addressing the importance beer has in German Catholic life, and thus the significance of breweries for German Catholics, whether in Europe or America.

Conclusion

Wimmer served a long and rewarding term as Saint Vincent's abbot, then archabbot. He attended the First Vatican Council in 1869, and became an influential patriarch of American Catholicism in the 1870s and 1880s. When Wimmer died on December 8, 1887,[38] he could look back on over four decades of service to the Catholic community and God through his work at Saint Vincent. He overcame the controversies that plagued Saint Vincent's early years, notably the brewery controversy, allowing him and his monks to express their cultural and religious identity in the face of the American temperance movement. His deft handling of the brewery controversy shows his masterful understanding of the complex church hierarchy and patronage system, which supported American Catholic monasticism. Wimmer left a legacy as Saint Vincent Archabbey remains an important site for many American Catholics, lay and professed.

Notes

1. Eccles. 8:15.

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3. Ibid.

4. Paul G. Monson, "Monastic Evangelization? The Sacramental Vision of America's Early Benedictine Monks," *American Catholic Studies* 124, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 50-51.

5. Felix Fellner, "The Rev. Theodore Brouwers, O.F.M. Missionary in the West Indies and the Pioneer Priest in Western Pennsylvania," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 25, no. 4 (1914): 361. Accessed August 29, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44208304.

6. Henry A. Szarnicki, *Michael O'Connor, First Catholic Bishop of Pittsburgh, 1843-1860: A Story of the Catholic Pioneers of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Wolfson Publishing Co., 1971), 34.

7. Jerome Oetgen, *Mission to America: A History of Saint Vincent Archabbey, the First Benedictine Monastery in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 26-46.

8. Jerome Oetgen, "Boniface Wimmer and the Founding of St. Vincent Archabbey," *The American Benedictine Review*, no. 22 (June 1971): 149-50.

9. Jerome Oetgen, *An American Abbot: Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B., 1809-1887* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 41. Jerome Oetgen, ed, *Boniface Wimmer: Letters of an American Abbot* (Latrobe, PA: Saint Vincent Archabbey Publications, 2008), 9-11.

10. Oetgen, *An American Abbot*, 42-47.

11. Ibid., 49-52.

12. Joel Rippinger, "Adapting Benedictine Monasticism to Nineteenth-Century America," *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 3, no. 4 (1984): 295.

13. Oetgen, *Mission to America*, 78.

14. Felix Fellner, *Abbot Boniface and His Monks*, Vol. 1 & 2. 5 vols, (Latrobe, PA: St. Vincent's Archabbey, 1956), 129.

15. Szarnicki, *Michael O'Connor, First Catholic Bishop of Pittsburgh, 1843-1860*, 92.

16. Lawrence J. McCrank, "Religious Orders and Monastic Communalism in America," in *American Communal Utopias* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 216-24.

17. Ibid., 221.

18. Joel Rippinger, *The Benedictine Order In The U.S.: An Interpretive History* (Liturgical Press, 1990), 44-49.

19. McCrank, "Religious Orders and Monastic Communalism in America," 216-18.

20. Oetgen, ed, *Boniface Wimmer: Letters of An American Abbot*, 100.

21. Oetgen, *An American Abbot,* 139-40.

22. Fellner, *Abbot Boniface and His Monks*, Vol. 1 & 2, 128.

23. Szarnicki, *Michael O'Connor, First Catholic Bishop of Pittsburgh, 1843-1860*, 88.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., 90.

26. Oetgen, *An American Abbot*, 143.

27. Szarnicki, *Michael O'Connor, First Catholic Bishop of Pittsburgh, 1843-1860*, 90.

28. Colman J. Barry, "Boniface Wimmer, Pioneer of the American Benedictines," *Catholic Historical Review*, no. 3 (1955): 282.

29. Jerome Oetgen, ed, *Boniface Wimmer: Letters of An American Abbot*, (Latrobe, PA: Saint Vincent Archabbey Publications, 2008), 108.

30. Fellner, *Abbot Boniface and His Monks*, Vol. 1 & 2, 137.

31. Szarnicki, *Michael O'Connor, First Catholic Bishop of Pittsburgh, 1843-1860*, 89-90.

32. Fellner, *Abbot Boniface and His Monks*, Vol. 1 & 2. 5 vols, 141.

33. Ibid., 143-44.

34. Ibid., 137.

35. Ibid., 144.

36. Oetgen, ed, *Boniface Wimmer*, 237.

37. Szarnicki, *Michael O'Connor, First Catholic Bishop of Pittsburgh, 1843-1860*, 93.

38. Russ Henry and Mary Henry, "St Vincent Cemetery Unity Township Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania," Westmoreland Township, July 2000.