

## **Departures of the Forgotten Bishop: Thomas Francis Brennan (1855-1916) of Dallas and St. John's**

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In Catholic historical circles, there is little conventional wisdom about Thomas Francis Brennan. Somewhat known in America, he is virtually unknown to Canadians; in the historiographies of Catholicism in both countries he barely receives so much as a footnote. And even in the Archdiocese of St. John's, Newfoundland, most Catholics who pride themselves on their historical knowledge are unable to identify much about him, save that he was the first Bishop of Dallas, Texas, who briefly came to St. John's before disappearing. Who was this disappearing bishop? Why were his tenures in the United States and Newfoundland so short? No extensive study yet has been done on Brennan, so this article is intended as a preliminary examination of his career, rather than the last word.<sup>1</sup> It identifies issues for further research on the character of Catholicism in Dallas and St. John's, and concludes with brief remarks on the approach taken by Rome in dealing with embarrassing clerics.

Thomas Francis Brennan was born on 10 October 1855 at Bally Cullen, between Cloneen and Mullinahone, in County Tipperary, Ireland.<sup>2</sup> According to Brennan, he was "born on the banks of the sweet and smiling Annar [River] above which old Slievenamon lifts his haughty brow."<sup>3</sup> Like many people in Tipperary, his parents James and Margaret (Dunne) Brennan likely would have admired Thomas Francis Meagher, the hero of the Young Ireland rebellion of 1848, who later became a Union General in

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<sup>2</sup>Carlos E. Costaneda, *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 1519-1936* (Austin, Texas: Van Boeckman-Jones Co., 1958), vii.

<sup>3</sup>Dallas Diocesan Archives (hereafter DDA), biographical file, "Thomas Francis Brennan."

the U.S. Civil War, famous for his part in the Battle of Bull Run, and later, Acting Governor of Montana. That the young Brennan was named after such a revolutionary, secular, and popular figure would seem to indicate the importance to his parents of Irish nationalist politics and the great potential in America for the Irish. When Brennan was eight years old, he and his family emigrated from Ireland to Cameron County, Pennsylvania. His father was a classics teacher, and his parents placed a high premium on education.<sup>4</sup> For Irish immigrants, the family would have been unlike most Irish coming to America, who would have been working class and barely literate. Thomas attended public schools in McKean County and Scranton, Pennsylvania, and as a teenager he attended St. Bonaventure's Seminary run by the Franciscan Fathers in Allegheny, New York. He proved to be an excellent student. In the fall of 1873 at age 18, he studied classics and philosophy for a short time under the Sulpicians at a seminary near Rouen, France before undertaking four and a half years of studies in theology with Jesuit tutors at the University of Innsbruck, from which he graduated with a doctor's degree.<sup>5</sup> On 4 July 1880 he was ordained to the priesthood for the diocese of Erie, Pennsylvania, by the prince-bishop of Brixen in the Austrian Tyrol, John de Leiss.<sup>6</sup> Brennan spent at least part of 1881 studying Canon Law in Rome,<sup>7</sup> before returning to the United States for eight years of parish work, including appointments by Bishop Tobias Mullen of Erie to St. Michael's Parish in Greenville and soon after, St. Catherine's Parish in Dubois, Pennsylvania.

Brennan's first full pastoral assignment was at St. Mary's parish in Frenchville, Clearfield County, where he remained until he was appointed pastor of St. James parish, Driftwood. Here he took part in the itinerant mission circuit, building churches at mission outposts in Sterling Run and Galeton. According to the Diocese of Erie's historian, Robert Barcio, Brennan's missions were "widely separated, the most distant being at Germania one hundred seventy five miles by rail in Potter County."<sup>8</sup> Gifted with youth and linguistic ability, Brennan must have been seen by Bishop Mullen as a potentially ideal priest, even though his formidable education and European experience - compared with other priests in his diocese -

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<sup>4</sup>Steve Landregan, *Circuit Rider to Cathedral: How the Diocese of Dallas Came to be* (Dallas, TX: Diocese of Dallas Archives, 2002), 39.

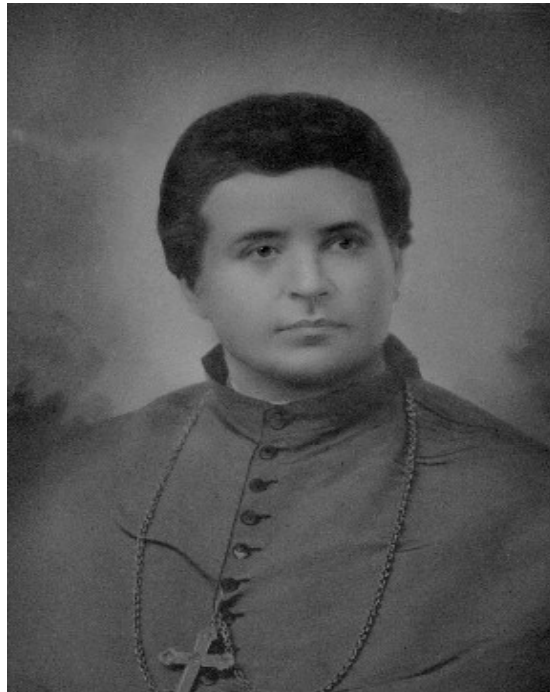
<sup>5</sup>Archives of the Archdiocese of St. John's (hereafter AASJ), Bishop Thomas Francis Brennan Papers, 105/A, biographical material; See also DDA, biographical file, "Thomas Francis Brennan."

<sup>6</sup>AASJ, Brennan Papers, 105/A, biographical file.

<sup>7</sup>*Erie Daily Times*, 6 April 1891.

<sup>8</sup>Robert G. Barcio, *Cathedral in the Wilderness: A History of the Diocese of Erie, 1853-1920* (Erie, PA: Diocese of Erie, 1991), 218.

must have made him something of a social misfit with his fellow clergy. Politically, Mullen had remained scrupulously aloof from the ideological debates surrounding Americanism and the need for immigrants to culturally assimilate, debates which divided the American church in the 1880s.<sup>9</sup> Brennan had a full spectrum of ethnicities and cultures in his congregation, and for the time being he fit the bill admirably as a pastor.



**Thomas Francis Brennan (1855-1916), First Bishop of Dallas, Texas (1891-1893),  
Coadjutor Bishop of St. John's, Newfoundland (1893)**

However, the life of a country pastor ministering to ethnic groups in rural Pennsylvania was not to be Brennan's lot. In the late 1880s he returned to Europe and made a grand tour of Germany, Constantinople,

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 210.

Spain, and Africa.<sup>10</sup> On 11 January 1888 Brennan was elevated to the monsignorate and made a papal chamberlain, a signal honour, and Bishop Mullen sent the new monsignor to Rome to represent the Diocese of Erie at the sacerdotal jubilee celebrations for Pope Leo XIII. In the Eternal City, Brennan greatly impressed his fellow Irishman, Bishop Thomas Heslin of Natchez, Mississippi, who remarked that he “speaks German as fluently as English, French like an educated Parisian, and Italian as correctly as English; as a linguist he has few superiors.”<sup>11</sup> Two years later, Heslin nominated Brennan to be the first bishop of the newly created Diocese of Dallas, Texas, which had just been created in the ecclesiastical province of New Orleans from the division of the Diocese of Galveston. Brennan was not on the first *terna* or list of three possible candidates submitted to Rome by the consultors of the Diocese of Galveston, but he was on a second one submitted by the bishops of the New Orleans province, and though no one at the Vatican or among the cardinals and curial officials in its congregation responsible for the Church’s missionary territories - Propaganda Fide - knew him well, on paper his linguistic accomplishments placed him head and shoulders over fellow candidates.<sup>12</sup> Brennan was appointed Bishop of Dallas on 22 December 1890.<sup>13</sup> He was just thirty-five years old when Bishop Mullen consecrated him at St. Peter’s Cathedral in Erie on 5 April 1891.<sup>14</sup> Despite his lack of maturity in years, in many ways, Rome saw Brennan as the ideal candidate. Having rejected a *terna* of local names generated in Texas, Rome saw in Brennan a learned churchman, an

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<sup>10</sup>*Erie Daily Times*, 6 April 1891.

<sup>11</sup>*The Catholic Herald*, Memphis, Tennessee, 23 August 1891, Archives of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, Rome (Propaganda Fide) (hereafter APF), *Acta* series, Vol 260 (1890), ff. 294-5, note of Teodolfo Cardinal Mertel, December 1890, “*Sulla nomina del titolare alla nuova Sede vescovile di Dallas della Provincia Ecclesiastica di Nuova Orleans.*” He notes that Brennan spoke Latin, English, French, Spanish, German, Polish, Italian, and Hungarian, and claims that Brennan also “undoubtedly” spoke Gaelic. See Franklin C. Williams, Jr., *Lone Star Bishops: The Roman Catholic Hierarchy in Texas* (Waco, Texas: Texan Press, 1997), 189 and 191.

<sup>12</sup>Brennan ranked second (*dignior*) in the New Orleans *terna*. APF, *Acta*, Vol 260 (1890), ff. 294-5, Mertel, “*Sulla nomina.*” Also see f. 296, 15 December 1890, in which Mertel chose Brennan.

<sup>13</sup>The ecclesiastical province of New Orleans included the States of Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and Arkansas and administered the Indian Territory which is now the State of Oklahoma, while the new diocese of Dallas consisted of the 108 counties north of the counties of Lampasas, Coryell, McLennan, Freestone, Anderson, Cherokee, Nacogdoches, and Shelby. See AASJ, Brennan Papers, 105/A, biographical material and Franklin C. Williams, Jr., *Lone Star Bishops*, 190-191.

<sup>14</sup>James Tucek, *A Century of Faith: The Story of the Diocese of Dallas* (Dallas, TX: Diocese of Dallas, 1990), 30.

outsider removed from any of the local squabbles, and especially, a man whose youth and vigour would allow him to endure the strain of constant travel in a rural diocese of 108,000 square miles. His contemporary Fr. Joseph Lynch described him as: “Barely 36 years of age, possessed of a handsome physique, having a dynamic personality, a brilliant conversationalist, a most eloquent orator, and an accomplished linguist, he easily succeeded in captivating the public wherever he went.”<sup>15</sup>

Arriving in the town of Dallas on the mud flats of the Trinity River on 24 April 1891,<sup>16</sup> Brennan found himself in the wild, wild west. Sacred Heart Church at the corner of Bryan and Ervay streets in Dallas was supposed to be his cathedral, but it was in a shambles and needed substantial repairs. While Dallas had still been a part of the Diocese of Galveston, the parish priest, Father Joseph Blum, thought repairs to be too costly, so he took out a mortgage and purchased a new piece of property for \$30,000 at the corner of Ross and Pearl Streets, intending to pay for it by the sale of the land at Bryan and Ervay. But financial instability in world markets undermined these plans. In 1890, Baring Brothers Bank had collapsed, as a result of overexposure to Argentine debt, and instability reverberated through the world’s economies. Blum’s land did not sell, and Brennan arrived in Dallas looking for a new cathedral (he was installed on 8 May 1891 in St. Patrick’s Church). The new bishop faced a huge mortgage on the cathedral lands, plus a mortgage of \$2500 on St. Joseph’s Orphanage in the Oak Cliff neighborhood of Dallas, which was deemed unsuitable for this purpose as it remained unfurnished. It also faced foreclosure. In reply to an address of welcome to his new diocese on 12 September 1891, Brennan remarked:

I am but a man as yourselves and you must bear with me in my failings,  
knowing that I have your best good at heart. A priest may be removed,  
but a bishop is wedded to his church and must abide with it until death.  
You have spoken of me as a young man; if you want to keep me  
perpetually young, you will help in all our financial difficulties....<sup>17</sup>

In hindsight, Brennan’s remarks seem to prefigure his own deepening financial difficulties, which eventually would come to cause serious problems for the new bishop.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>*Dallas Herald*, 25 April 1891.

<sup>17</sup>DDA, Bishop Brennan Papers, “Life of Bishop Brennan, First Bishop of Dallas,” ms. possibly written by Bishop Joseph P. Lynch of Dallas (1911-54), n.d., p. 3. Regarding Brennan’s concern with finances on his arrival also see newspaper clipping “Fifty Years Ago Today it Happened,” *Dallas Morning News*, 28 April 1941.

Among ordinary rank-and-file Catholics, Brennan enjoyed a fine reputation, and it was remarked that “No place was too far away for him to visit, no straggling village to insignificant for him to notice, no audience too poor or illiterate for him to address.”<sup>18</sup> The contemporary public press also gushed forth compliments. The *Denison Herald* called him “one of America’s foremost divines in every branch of human knowledge,” and the *Memphis Catholic Journal* described him as “one of the most scholarly and zealous prelates in America.”<sup>19</sup> Brennan was conscientious about his pastoral work. Traveling throughout his diocese of 20,000 Catholics, of whom 9,000 were Indians, Brennan and his seventeen priests worked with various communities of women religious, such as the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur in Denison and Sherman, the Sisters of the Holy Cross at Marshall, the Sisters of St. Agnes at Texarkana, the Sisters of Divine Providence at Clarksville, and in Dallas itself, the Ursuline Sisters.<sup>20</sup> He began ordaining priests, opening churches and schools, preaching in the various languages of his congregations, and implementing the Forty Hours’ Devotions.<sup>21</sup> He was also solicitous, for his time and territory, towards Black Americans, remarking to the *Dallas Morning News* on the day of his arrival “... we would, after a while, have a school in Dallas for colored children...I will get up a good school for the colored people as soon as we get through with other matters.”<sup>22</sup>

It did not take long, however, for Brennan to run afoul of his clergy and religious, among whom there was discontent with the new bishop from the start. From the outset, Brennan’s challenges were more than financial. He diligently cultivated a good reputation among the literate in his diocese, establishing the newspaper *The Texas Catholic*. But this elicited more criticism than praise, particularly from one priest who reported that “it seems to have no other purpose but the praise of the Bishop and the Vicar General in turn, and has become an object of ridicule.”<sup>23</sup> Brennan made statements which clearly were secular rhetorical forays into American politics and nationalism. In an 1891 letter to the Catholic Truth Society (CTS) of St. Paul, Minnesota, Brennan wrote: “‘The truth will make you free’ addresses itself with particular force to every Catholic heart in this liberty blessed land of America...Catholic truth has secured for America in

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Landregan, *Circuit Rider*, 39.

<sup>20</sup>Tucek, *Century of Faith*, 33.

<sup>21</sup>Williams, *Lone Star Bishops*, 192.

<sup>22</sup>DDA, biographical file, “Bishop Thomas Brennan.” See also *Dallas Morning News*, 26 April 1891, 12.

<sup>23</sup>Tucek, *Century of Faith*, 33.

four hundred years a greater and more solid advancement than the old world has in fourteen centuries achieved.” In reply, the CTS extolled Brennan’s letter as rivaling “in zeal and enthusiasm the address of our own Archbishop [John] Ireland.”<sup>24</sup> In a public address on 26 November 1891, Brennan warned his listeners about Canada’s dangerous Britishness: “We have on the north of us a dependency of Great Britain which can have no future until it severs the bonds uniting it to a government far across the seas, alien if not hostile to the idea of popular sovereignty.” Brennan then gushed forth about the pivotal importance of Texas in America’s Manifest Destiny: “If America is the hope of the world, the grandest expression and most powerful exponent of human freedom that ever was or could be, Texas, the home of our birth or of our adoption, is the hope of America.”<sup>25</sup>

Intent on making his nationalism explicit, in a pastoral letter to his clergy of 22 February 1892, Brennan directed them to celebrate Columbus Day on 12 October with High Mass and sermons in all churches. “America is the world’s greatest blessing,” he told the priests. “God’s greatest blessing to mankind since the coming of Christ was the discovery of America.”<sup>26</sup> Such nationalist sentiments may have gone over well with some of his congregants, but with his fellow bishops and priests, they would have smacked of hubris and an unadvised religious foray into the realm of the secular. For his pronouncements Brennan made a most determined enemy in Dutch-born Archbishop Francis A. Janssens of New Orleans, who for 7 July 1892, wrote in his diary: “Left today for Dallas where I stayed one day with the Bishop, and assisted the following day at the dedication of the new, fine, stone church at Fort Worth. Among the clergy, sisters, and laity there are signs of much dissatisfaction on account of the arbitrary and uncanonical actions of the Bishop.”<sup>27</sup> Janssens also described Brennan as “an impudent letter writer, lacking the least idea of delicacy of sentiment.”

Brennan’s imprudence and indelicacy may have originated in his zeal to find money with which to pay diocesan debts and cover the expenses of a cathedral, the main item on his agenda, about which he informed his congregation when he met them on 27 April.<sup>28</sup> But the new bishop’s

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<sup>24</sup>DDA, Brennan Papers, “Life of Bishop Brennan, First Bishop of Dallas,” n.d., 4.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>27</sup>Tucek, *Century of Faith*, 35. It is unclear exactly which canons Janssens believed were violated by Brennan.

<sup>28</sup>*Dallas Morning News*, 27 April 1891, 8.

deficiencies also extended to matters of personal tact, diplomacy, and good judgment. A banker with children in the Ursuline Academy of Dallas approached Mother M. Evangelist of the Ursuline Sisters, inquiring whether the school and property belonged to the bishop, because Brennan had listed both as collateral property when pressed on the debt of his diocese.<sup>29</sup> Shocked and in fear, Mother Evangelist then wrote Mother General Ignatius in New Orleans warning that Bishop Brennan was claiming Ursuline property as his own. He had written to her asking her opinion of “the Council of Baltimore which says, no. 272, ‘The Bishop is guardian and superior of all church property in his diocese’; and no. 280, ‘that schools should be in his name?’” Now, he intended to try to change the Ursuline congregation’s Constitution in order to take over its school and property.<sup>30</sup> Mother Evangelist was instructed to hold fast and inform the bishop that the constitutions of religious congregations could not be changed without Roman approval. At the behest of clergy in the diocese, Mother Evangelist complained about Brennan to his superiors at Propaganda Fide in Rome, grieving about the “suffering of the Community” and seeking the protection of the Holy See “from the dangers which threaten us.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, when Brennan began to accumulate significant personal debt, he began applying monies he had borrowed from the parish of Corsicana, south of Dallas. The pastor of Corsicana learned of this and also protested to Propaganda. Brennan’s actions sparked an outpouring of complaints from various priests in his diocese who accused their bishop of being a “tyrant” who used “spies” to intimidate them; that he was a proud and outspoken man; that he used “rude and scandalous” language,<sup>32</sup> and worst of all, that he approved of non-Catholic schools, an accusation which insinuated that Brennan was infected with Americanism and secularism.<sup>33</sup>

Disregarding the growing tumult in his diocese, Brennan actively lobbied Rome to raise Dallas to the status of a metropolitan see, with himself as archbishop,<sup>34</sup> even going so far as to encourage civic leaders such as the mayor, state senators, the US Consul in Rome, and even Texas Governor James Stephen Hogg to write Propaganda in favour of Brennan’s

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Diocese of Dallas Archives, Bishop Brennan Papers, article by Steve Landregan, “Thomas Francis Brennan,” *Texas Catholic*, 21 July 2000.

<sup>33</sup>Landregan, *Circuit Rider*, 41.

<sup>34</sup>Tucek, *Century of Faith*, 39.

elevation.<sup>35</sup> To Propaganda, Brennan wrote extolling the virtues of elevating the See of Dallas, pulling out all the stops with what Mgr. James Tucek has called the “Texas brag.” He boasted that Texas had 9,000 miles of railway, 11,000 miles of telegraph lines, the taxable wealth “of untold millions” and “an inexhaustable mountain of iron and coal insuring its preeminence as a manufacturing state.” Texas, he said, was “larger than the German Empire...larger than Austria.” Furthermore, Brennan revealed his Americanist bent to Rome when he mistakenly played the ethnic card, blithely informing the Roman curia of his fear that to elevate the Diocese of San Antonio, with its predominantly Spanish-speaking Catholics to metropolitan status would, along with French-speaking New Orleans, and Spanish-speaking Santa Fe, complete the “foreignization of the Southwest.”<sup>36</sup> Such claims would have played poorly among an international body of cardinals and curia in Rome, who by Brennan’s inability to get along smoothly with the creditors, religious, and clergy in his diocese had now been made the court of last resort for the local problems of the Diocese of Dallas. On one hand, Propaganda was receiving Brennan’s boundless and immodest requests for greater prestige and power, supported by a galaxy of politicians, while on the other hand, Propaganda was faced with the matter of the Ursulines and Archbishop Janssens of New Orleans and his suffragan Bishop Nicholas Gallagher of the Diocese of Galveston, who opposed Brennan’s elevation to the archepiscopacy, and who had tired of him and his antics. Brennan left Rome in an impossible situation, which was overdue for resolution.

One final complaint against Brennan tipped the balance against him. At some point near the end of his tenure in Dallas, Brennan faced what came to be interpreted as serious accusations from a woman in his diocese, Agnes Duncan. These charges were not documented until long after Brennan left Dallas, but in Rome’s eyes the growing evidence was enough to tip the balance against Brennan, for the bishop clearly had made some enemies. Arriving in Rome in August 1892 in advance of his regular *ad limina* visit, expecting to return to America as an archbishop, Brennan discovered that Italy had gone on its summer holidays and the pope was away at Castel Gandolfo. When Brennan finally found curial officials, he

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<sup>35</sup>“As a citizen of Texas and its Executive, I feel desirous of seeing its progress acknowledged and its growth promoted by the governing bodies of the various Christian churches. Hence, I would rejoice to see a Catholic Archbishop in the person of the Right Reverend Dr. Brennan named for this state.” Excerpt from letter of Governor James Stephen Hogg to Cardinal Prefect, Propaganda Fide, 28 July 1892, cited in Tucek, *Century of Faith*, 40.

<sup>36</sup>Tucek, *Century of Faith*, 40.

appeared before Propaganda Fide, and was welcomed not with the adulation of cardinals, but rather was confronted with a litany of complaints and charges from Dallas. Stunned and saddened, he wrote to Cardinal Ledochowski on 19 November 1892, offering his resignation.<sup>37</sup> Pope Leo XIII reserved the case to himself to consider, but he accepted the resignation. Ledochowski wrote Archbishop Janssens on 14 March 1893 advising of Brennan's resignation and directing Janssens in New Orleans to prepare a new *terna*.

Given Brennan's career in Dallas, what happened next is puzzling. Rome had on its hands a bishop who was unacceptable in Dallas, but who was still young enough to discharge pastoral duties. Perhaps Brennan might grow in the job. Perhaps he wasn't seen as a complete liability. So what should be done with him? Brennan was sent to Bishop Michel-Thomas Labrecque of Chicoutimi, Québec, whom the Holy See authorized to give Brennan the faculties of a vice-prefect apostolic, despite Brennan having had "legal difficulties" in Dallas.<sup>38</sup> But Labrecque did not want Brennan once he discovered Brennan's history, so he suggested that Propaganda approach Irish-born Thomas Joseph Power (1830-1893, Bishop of St. John's, Newfoundland 1870-93), who agreed to take Brennan as coadjutor.<sup>39</sup> Cardinal Ledochowski sent Brennan to the Diocese of St. John's as coadjutor to Bishop Power, but when Brennan arrived, the appointment was clearly understood in Newfoundland as being *without* right of future succession. Perhaps Propaganda was giving him another chance. Maybe all Brennan needed was to be placed under the wing of a "good influence."

Just before Power's appointment to the See of St. John's in 1870, he had exercised a position of considerable formative influence as Rector of Holy Cross Seminary at Clonliffe, Dublin. For St. John's, Power was the

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<sup>37</sup>Archives of the University of Notre Dame, Indiana (hereafter AND), microfilm papers of the Apostolic Delegate to the United States, from Propaganda Fide, Rome (hereafter MPRF), 74/657-659 (#203), note of Brennan requesting dismissal.

<sup>38</sup>APF, New Series, Vol. 363, File: Proposed election of Thomas Brennan, former Bishop of Dallas, Texas, United States, as coadjutor to the Bishop of St. John's, Newfoundland, fols. 21-23, Propaganda Fide to Labrecque, 6 April 1893.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, fols. 24-5, Labrecque to Cardinal Ledochowski, 28 April 1893. Labrecque did not recommend Brennan to the Irish bishops of Halifax or Saint John. Perhaps Labrecque thought that the bishops of these dioceses did not need help, or perhaps he saw Newfoundland as having a culture much closer to Ireland and thus more suitable to Brennan than those of Nova Scotia or New Brunswick. *Ibid.*, fols. 33-34, Ledochowski to Power, 9 June 1893.

clear choice of his friend and patron, Paul Cardinal Cullen, who performed his episcopal consecration, and Power proved to be a calming influence, avoiding politics, and spreading liturgical reforms and inculcating the principles of Ultramontanism among priests and people who on more than one occasion had previously found themselves mixing religion and politics. But by the 1890s, physical and mental infirmities began to curtail Power's administrative effectiveness, even though in Newfoundland the church was at the relative zenith of its development. Overwhelmingly composed of third-generation and older families whose ancestors had come from southeast Ireland, Catholicism had become a cradle-to-grave ethno-religious cultural environment for the island's 35,000 Catholics. Compared to Dallas, St. John's was not the wild, wild west, but rather the civilized quiet east. For all this, Power seems not to have known much of Brennan's record, and it is possible that he consented to accept a coadjutor sight - unseen.

When Brennan arrived in St. John's in the spring of 1893, he found a city in the midst of a construction boom following a devastating fire that had destroyed two-thirds of the housing stock. He soon gained the strong favour of local Catholics, but the reasons for this are unclear; perhaps they adopted him as one of their own once they learned of his birth in Tipperary, a county in Ireland from which many of their own ancestors had come. Any joy at Brennan's arrival, though, was eclipsed by the steady decline in Bishop Power's health. His priests were all abuzz with speculation about a successor, and their discussion of Brennan's reputation followed soon behind. When Power died on 4 December 1893, Bishop Ronald Macdonald of Harbour Grace, Newfoundland hastily appointed Archdeacon John Scott as Diocesan Administrator.<sup>40</sup> Scott declared the Diocese of St. John's to be *sede vacante*, and Brennan was left in limbo. Complicating matters was that Brennan claimed to be the administrator upon Power's death, but Propaganda Fide sustained Scott over Brennan.<sup>41</sup> His credibility in the diocese was made increasingly tenuous by growing news of the mess he had left behind in Dallas. It took until the latter half of 1893 for more serious charges against Brennan's episcopacy to begin to arrive in Rome, but by then, they were the common talk of the North American Church.

As it turned out, not only Propaganda Fide had been on the receiving end of complaints about Brennan. The Apostolic Delegate to the United States, Archbishop Francesco Satolli, was also besieged with

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., fols. 63-64, Macdonald to Ledochowski, 18 December 1893.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

correspondence. In June Bishop Edward Fitzgerald of Little Rock, Arkansas (who had replaced Brennan as the administrator for the Diocese of Dallas), reported to Msgr. Donato Sbaretto, Auditor of the Apostolic Delegation, that a booklet had been published making charges against Brennan.<sup>42</sup> Then on 24 June 1893, one Agnes M. Duncan of Oakland, Texas wrote Satolli, declaring that she did not wish to enrage Brennan, but that a certain statement recently made about him was wrong.<sup>43</sup> That August, Satolli received a letter from one George Hunter and “other American Citizens” charging that in May 1892, they had loaned \$1488 to Brennan for his diocese, but now that he had left Dallas, they had learned that he had not used the money for his diocese but instead used it for his personal reasons, furnishing it to a private party.<sup>44</sup> Countering the accusations against Brennan was F.J. Murnane, a Dallas notary who was Brennan’s chief informant on the affairs of his former diocese, and possibly, was his lawyer. Murnane wrote Satolli on 26 September 1893 about the Delegate’s defence of Brennan in the Dallas press as “a most worthy prelate” to be transferred to Newfoundland, arguing that if Satolli was reported correctly, “our many clergy [in Dallas], together with our Bishop Administrator [Fitzgerald], are to be regarded as the worse league of assassins that God, in His Wisdom, ever permitted to live in iniquity.”<sup>45</sup> Murnane later wrote Satolli that he was “now convinced” that the Delegate did not know the truth about the supposed “infamy” of Brennan, and that even the Protestant press in Dallas had tried to protect Catholics against the scandal.<sup>46</sup> Finally, Brennan seems to have learned of the charges against him by Duncan, and he himself wrote Satolli on 6 October, informing the Delegate that he could stay in Newfoundland, but noting that he did not like to be criticized by a woman, and he asked Satolli to send him a copy of Agnes Duncan’s charges against him.<sup>47</sup> Exactly what happened in Dallas remains a mystery. Was Agnes Duncan the “private party” for whom he borrowed money to pay? What is clear is that Brennan, impecunious and possessing poor judgment, at best seems to have gotten into enough debt to

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<sup>42</sup>*Archivio Segreto Vaticano*, Rome, *Delegazione Apostolica Stati Uniti d’America*, IX, File: Dallas, 2: S.E. Mons. Thomas F. Brennan (1893), Fitzgerald to Sbaretto, 15 June 1893.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, statement of Agnes M. Duncan, 24 June 1893. The present author is unable to determine exactly what in Duncan’s comments about Brennan would have angered or “enraged” him.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, George Hunter to Satolli, 21 August 1893.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, F.J. Murnane to Satolli, 26 September 1893. See also Satolli’s comments in *The Dallas Morning News*, 22 September 1893.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, F.J. Murnane to Satolli, 10 October 1893.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, Brennan to Satolli, 6 October 1893.

draw public attention and scorn in Dallas, and into some sort of relationship with Agnes Duncan which turned sour.

While the laity of St. John's remained blissfully ignorant of the accusations against Brennan, rumours about his past quickly spread among the clergy of the city. Although Brennan is an elusive figure in the recorded annals of Newfoundland church history, some indication of the local understanding in St. John's of the charges against him was documented by John Luke Slattery, an Irish Christian Brother. Slattery was an inveterate diarist and the President of St. Bonaventure's College, the Church's most prestigious institution of higher learning in Newfoundland. As gatekeeper and referee of the graduates of St. Bon's into the professions and apprenticeships, he was one of the most influential power-brokers in late nineteenth century Catholic Newfoundland.<sup>48</sup> In January 1894, Slattery reported on Brennan's character to the Brother Assistant of his order in Dublin, Ireland:

There is great excitement over the appointment of a new bishop. You remember Dr. Brennan was sent here as assistant to Dr. Power. He had been only two years in Dallas (Texas) and had to resign. Dr. Power was delighted with him at first, but when he found out his real character and the causes of his leaving Dallas, his heart broke and he sank under a simple illness. The people are immensely taken with the new man. He aims at popularity. The priests, knowing now his real character and past history, have sent a protest to Rome. They have also recommended Dean Ryan for the Mitre but of course the Holy See is not easily influenced. Very grave charges are made against the private life of Dr. Brennan and the Holy See is aware of all. May the Lord have mercy on us and give us a good Bishop. Dean Ryan is a very holy man and a sincere friend of ours. He was one of the strongest advocates in our getting the college and is one of its directors...P.S. don't mention about Dr. Brennan as a very few persons are aware of things. The priests tell me what is going on. Peter [Kennedy] knows there is something wrong but does not know the [details] and nor of course [do] any of the Brothers.<sup>49</sup>

By 12 February 1894, Slattery reported that Brennan had been in America for several weeks, and the situation among Catholics in St. John's was tense as the people awaited to learn the identity of their new bishop:

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<sup>48</sup>On Slattery's educational career in St. John's see J.B. Darcy, *Fair or Foul the Weather: Brother Luke Slattery's Presidency of St. Bonaventure's College, 1889 to 1895* (St. John's: Creative Publishers, 1999).

<sup>49</sup>AASJ, Brennan Papers, 105/1/4, Extracts from correspondence of Br. J.L. Slattery to superiors, 1894-1895, Slattery to Brother Assistant, 22 January 1894.

I fear very much that matters will be very strange here before the final settlement is made. We have all the elements for serious trouble - no matter which way the wind blows. I need not say that the Brothers are cautious - the ice is thin. The people are all for Dr. Brennan, the priests all against him. They are in a painful position, knowing the charges against Dr. Brennan and having abundant proof they must resist his appointment, at the same time without frightful scandal they cannot justify themselves before the people.<sup>50</sup>

Slattery's note would seem to indicate that a significant division existed in St. John's between Brennan and the priests of that diocese, a division which again would necessitate an intervention by Rome. In the interim, Brennan had been relieved of pastoral duties. Petitions to cardinals and officials in Propaganda Fide from his former congregants in Texas seeking his reinstatement in Dallas were common,<sup>51</sup> but ultimately these proved futile. Brennan also memorialized Rome with his own unseemly requests to be given the See of St. John's; he even suggested that Rome translate a Canadian bishop to Newfoundland and appoint Brennan to the vacancy.<sup>52</sup> But in the same breath Brennan discredited himself even more, as he was unable to resist slandering the Newfoundland priesthood without proof, resorting to claims that "the Catholics of St. John's hate Macdonald, Howley and the Irish priests of St. John's who are always drunk," revealing to Propaganda the chasm which had opened between himself and the Newfoundland clergy.<sup>53</sup>

On 7 May 1894, Slattery, now desperate for a new episcopal appointment for St. John's, reported to his correspondent in Ireland the imminent appointment of a new bishop, and made clear his own view that Brennan had overstayed his welcome in Newfoundland. Rome, Slattery reported, had "ordered" Bishop Michael Francis Howley of St. George's, Newfoundland and Bishop Ronald MacDonald of Harbour Grace to meet Archbishop Cornelius O'Brien of Halifax and create a new *terna*. MacDonald himself had solicited Slattery's input as to who the new bishop should be, but Slattery claimed:

I was astonished and declined any interference. ...the choice lies between Fr. Scott and Dean Ryan. Neither wants it. Dr. Brennan is still here - he

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 12 February 1894.

<sup>51</sup>For example see AND, MPRF 74/731-733 (#3864), petition of George Hutcheson and others to His Holiness Pope Leo XIII, 16 August 1893.

<sup>52</sup>APF, New Series, Vol. 363, fol. 83, Brennan to Ledochowski, 3 March 1894.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid. Presumably, by this time, Brennan was not describing himself as "Irish."

seems out of the count. His sad story is known to all the priests now and to all the bishops in the States. 'He will never get a diocese again' was Dr. McDonald's summing up. One would be inclined to pity him, if he did not force your contempt by his continual want of honesty and truth. Only last week Fr. Scott told me the facts relative to a "lost" letter. There could scarcely be a doubt but Dr. Brennan had intercepted and appropriated an important letter to Fr. Scott! Those who know him [Brennan] best say that he is a most imperious man, overbearing and authoritative - that he despises those whom he can frighten, that any respect he has is given to those who don't cringe but show fight, etc.<sup>54</sup>

At the conclusion of the Halifax conference, Slattery reported that the bishops "unanimously requested the Holy See to remove Dr. Brennan at once from St. John's," and Slattery opined, "So with God's blessing we shall soon see the last of this awful man."<sup>55</sup> But Slattery was compelled to further elaborate on Brennan's character and his flawed understandings of important issues of Catholic education and the need to respect his fellow clergy and religious:

Last week he said to one of the nuns, 'Look here - I'd put a bullet in MacDonald as easily as he would put one in a seal.' This was in reference to the fact that he found out Dr. MacDonald was opposed to him. I think I sent the Brother Assistant a copy of a letter I wrote re school matters here... I made reference to the defects of the U.S. system. Dr. Brennan's Yankee tail was trodden on, and at one of the Convents, he said, 'I'll knock the head off Slattery if he says another word about the schools in the States.' These things will give you an idea of the character of this man. His favorite subject of conversation at the Convents is the drunkenness of the nuns in the States, their illicit familiarity with priests, & etc. The priests who are intimate with him say he has no faith and that the possibilities for the future are frightful. Apostasy seems the most probable.<sup>56</sup>

Despite Brennan's seeming loss of vocation, he was still held in high regard by many of the townfolk of St. John's. "The people," wrote Slattery, "are simply infatuated with Dr. Brennan and they may show their teeth unpleasantly when he is ordered away." For his part, Brennan spent the summer of 1894 in St. John's and remained there until late that year. He avoided the priests of the diocese and at the Palace in St. John's he refused to take his meals with them, spending his nights playing cards with a servant man in a room off the Palace kitchen. Slattery reported that even the servants "whom his blatant democracy won at first, now think little of

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<sup>54</sup>AASJ, Brennan Papers, 105/1/4, Extracts from correspondence of Br. J.L. Slattery to superiors, 1894-1895, Slattery to Brother Assistant, 7 May 1894.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., Slattery to Brother Superior General, 2 June 1894.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., Slattery to Brother Superior General, 2 June 1894.

him. Indeed they say that ‘he tells lies.’” And then, giving full vent to his own hatred of Brennan, Slattery wrote that Monsignor Scott was forced to forbid him “to go beyond the vestry of the Convent...There were solid reasons. He is the most awful liar ever known. He cannot tell the truth. What is most strange is the extraordinary infatuation of the people.”<sup>57</sup> Slattery’s observations went well beyond reportage, and we can only speculate as to his motives for slandering Brennan. Did he fear Brennan, who was an outsider, a newcomer to Newfoundland? Slattery certainly was wary of Brennan’s ability to know who his enemies were, for he reported to Ireland that Brennan knew “every step taken” by the priests in St. John’s and Dallas, as well as “every priest who signed a protest,” and that somehow, “some high official in Rome” was “in collusion” with Brennan, for everything against him in Rome “seemed to get ‘side-tracked.’”<sup>58</sup> Was Slattery jealous of Brennan’s popularity (despite his flaws) among a people who, given to occasional flashes of Irish anti-clericalism, may not have held the shrewd Slattery or the priests of the diocese in quite the same regard? Or, was Slattery simply reporting the truth about Brennan?

Brennan’s relations with the Newfoundland clergy reached an all time low by the time Monsignor Scott and twenty priests of the Diocese of St. John’s petitioned Cardinal Ledochowski on 20 June 1894, notifying him that Brennan’s continued presence in St. John’s had become the cause of troubling speculation and rumours among the Newfoundland public. Newfoundlanders, they reminded the cardinal, were “of British Isles origin,” and they and their politicians were becoming troubled that any confirmation of Brennan’s appointment to St. John’s might signify that the island colony was about to be detached from the British Empire and attached to the United States.<sup>59</sup> Newfoundland in 1894 was in the midst of serious disputes with the British government over Britain’s reversal of policy and disallowance, at Canada’s behest, of a free trade treaty negotiated by Newfoundland politician Robert Bond with U.S. Secretary of State James Blaine. Talk of confederation with Canada, or indeed, talk of any constitutional change, was always a source of aggravation among the anti-confederate Catholic Irish of St. John’s who believed that they had

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., Slattery to Brother Assistant, 8 August 1894.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., Slattery to Brother Assistant, 30 June 1894.

<sup>59</sup>APF, New Series, Vol. 363, fols. 51-55, Scott to Ledochowski, 20 June 1894. Ibid., fols 74-75 indicate that on 20 January 1894, Scott and nineteen other priests of St. John’s sent Ledochowski their own version of a *terna* for the diocese, including: Fr. John Ryan (*dignissimus*), Bishop M.F. Howley (*dignior*), and Mgr. John Scott (*dignus*). Ibid., fols 100-103 indicate that Archbishop O’Brien of Halifax (in the name of himself and bishops Macdonald and Howley) sent Ledochowski the same *terna* on 16 May 1894.

“put over” responsible government and an independent parliament of Newfoundland in 1855. In December 1894, in the wake of a rush on Newfoundland’s banks following the suicide of the London director of one of the banks, confederation was briefly considered as a solution to the island’s problems by Britain, and by the acting premier of Newfoundland. The petition of the St. John’s clergy to Propaganda was perhaps as much a statement of fact as it was an attempt to shock Rome into action, for Scott knew that the Roman curia would not want the Church to incur the wrath of a politically-aggrieved population in any country. The clerical petition was the high water mark in the Brennan affair. It was one of the most significant examples of vicious clerical infighting over appointments ever witnessed in Newfoundland, and it marked the end of any hope Brennan had of becoming bishop of St. John’s.

Propaganda Fide came to see that the solution to the vacancy in St. John’s was to appoint a qualified local candidate, and for his part, Michael Francis Howley had proven eager for translation to the see of his own hometown, and to become the first native-born bishop of St. John’s. Having met with O’Brien and MacDonald at Halifax and proposed a *terna* with his own name on it, Howley had a strong hand in seeking his own appointment. On 20 December 1894, Propaganda proposed Howley to Pope Leo XIII and he approved. Where Brennan had been indiscreet and outspoken, Howley kept his own counsel. A scholar of the history of the Church in Newfoundland, and having studied in Rome at the Urban College of Propaganda Fide, from which he had taken a doctorate, he possessed sterling credentials and was of an orthodoxy which left Rome in no doubt. Howley was sent the brief of translation to St. John’s on 21 January 1895.<sup>60</sup>

Brother John Luke Slattery’s last report on Brennan was 16 December 1894, in which he noted that Brennan at last had returned to America for good.<sup>61</sup> Even after this, Brennan continued to lobby Rome for

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., fols. 140-141, Propaganda Fide to Howley, 21 January 1895. Ironically, Howley had a connection to another ‘Thomas Francis’: his aunt, Bridget Howley, of Clonmel, Co. Tipperary, had been engaged to Thomas Francis Meagher, the Young Irelander, but the engagement was broken upon his conviction for treason and deportation to Van Diemen’s Land, Tasmania (see John Mannion, “From Comfortable Farms to Mercantile Commerce and Cultural Politics: The Social Origins and Family Connections of Thomas Francis Meagher,” *Decies (Journal of the Waterford Archaeological and Historical Society)*, No. 59, 2003: 6).

<sup>61</sup>AASJ, Brennan Papers, 105/1/4, Extracts from correspondence of Br. J.L. Slattery to superiors, 1894-1895, Slattery to Brother Superior General, 16 December 1894.

appointments to various vacant Canadian sees. But the fullness of the reportage against him in Rome ensured that he would have no future as an active pastor or bishop. After he left Newfoundland, Brennan retired to no. 112, Via del Seminario in Rome, and later, to the Monastery of Grottoferrata in the Alban Hills, six miles outside Rome, where his maintenance was paid by Propaganda Fide until 1916, when the bishop of Dallas agreed to pay.<sup>62</sup> On 7 October 1905 Brennan was translated to the titular see of Caesarea in Mauritania, but he remained in Rome. He died on 21 March 1916 at the age of sixty-one, and was buried at Frascati, Italy, in an ornate outdoor tomb fashioned like an ancient temple fallen into ruin.<sup>63</sup> Brennan, whose episcopal career in two North American sees proved short-lived, was memorialized by a euphemistic inscription which in death glossed over the rough spots of life: "After having yielded up the Diocese of Dallas, he performed apostolic labours on the eastern shores of Canada."<sup>64</sup>

Brennan's tenures in the Dioceses of Dallas and St. John's speak clearly to the trials of the developing Church in nineteenth century North America, as well as to the role of the Holy See, particularly Propaganda Fide, in trying to foster but also regulate that development. In one sense, Brennan was an unfortunate and almost tragic figure whose inexperience, lack of judgment, and youth were overlooked by the Vatican in its haste to place men of zeal and charisma in the increasingly heterogeneous dioceses burgeoning in the American Southwest. His shortcomings ultimately discounted him from effective shepherding in the more established Newfoundland Church, where sharp tongued gatekeepers such as Slattery were quick to judge. He earned enemies early in his career, and was placed in situations from which he was unable to escape. The difficulties created for other dioceses, particularly St. John's and Chicoutimi, when they received Brennan's services before fully learning his story, and before they learned how ill-fitted by culture he was for ministry among people who were not Americans, ultimately created more scandal, and greater difficulties for a Roman curia unsure of what to do with an embarrassed and embarrassing bishop. The only remedies available to Rome in the late nineteenth century may well have been to dismiss and move those who had given offence, but this strategy was counterproductive and seriously divisive for the dioceses on the receiving end of such appointments. Brennan could run but he could not hide from his reputation. Brennan's

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<sup>62</sup>Correspondence of Matteo Sanfilippo (Rome) to the author, 24 April 2003.

<sup>63</sup>Williams, *Lone Star Bishops*, 195.

<sup>64</sup>DDA, Brennan Papers, "Life of Bishop Brennan, First Bishop of Dallas," n.d., 12.

story eerily foreshadowed the crisis and scandal that came to plague the North American church a century later when a similar unsuccessful strategy was employed in attempting to geographically relocate offending clerics.