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The Catholic Historical Review

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Cover illustration: Abbot-Bishop Leo M. Haid, O.S.B. (Photograph taken in 1915 and restored by Abbot Walter Coggin, O.S.B. Courtesy of the Archives of Belmont Abbey.)

AN ABBATIAL DIOCESE IN THE UNITED STATES

BY

PASCHAL BAUMSTEIN, O.S.B.*

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In North Carolina, in 1910, Catholic evangelization took an odd turn. For the first—and only—time, the peculiar concept of a cathedral abbey was translated to the United States. A territory of eight counties was extracted from conventional diocesan jurisdiction and subjected to the local Benedictine abbot. The monastic chapter was empowered to elect the successive ordinaries of the territory. Secular clergy in these counties were subordinated to the abbot's authority.

The abbey that commanded this jurisdiction was not one of the grand houses of the Order but a modest cloister with a struggling college and a poor farm. She was called "Maryhelp," so titled for her need, not her honor; popularly, she was known as "Belmont Abbey," after the nearby village.

Maryhelp had no great accomplishments to merit this gift of a diocesan territory; she had instead a brilliant, charismatic first abbot. Diocesan his-

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References in these notes to "Delegate" indicate the Apostolic Delegate in the United States.

References to "Primate" indicate the Abbot Primate of the Order of Saint Benedict.

Abbreviations:

AAB	Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore in Maryland
AAM	Archives of Belmont Abbey in North Carolina
ACF	Archives of the American Cassinese Congregation of the Order of Saint Benedict (Latrobe, Pennsylvania)
ADR	Archives of the Diocese of Raleigh in North Carolina
ADS	Archives of the Diocese of Savannah in Georgia
ASA	Archives of the Abbey of Sant'Anselmo in Rome (repository of the records of the Abbots Primate of the Order of Saint Benedict)
ASV	Archives of Saint Vincent Archabbey in Pennsylvania
NCB	Archives of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United States Catholic Conference in Washington, D.C.
OCD	Refers to the official Catholic directory or almanac for the year indicated
RG	Record Group (in the archives specified)
VA	Vatican Archives (records of the Apostolic Delegation in the United States, 1902-1911)

tory in Carolina was reordered in tribute to him. His honor, rather than local pastoral needs, influenced Rome to entrust this territory to the Benedictine Order.

Arrival of Benedictines

The Carolina monastery was founded in 1876, when Abbot Boniface Wimmer (1809–1887), the father of the Benedictine Order in North America, sent one monk and two students to a five-hundred-acre farm in Gaston County. North Carolina was the country's most heavily Protestant state. Catholicism there was virtually invisible. A population of 1,250,000 hosted only about 1,700 Catholics. An area of 52,669 square miles included only thirteen scattered churches, staffed by eight beleaguered priests.¹ Numbers were so meager that by 1877, with just three priests and five brothers, Maryhelp was the Catholic center of the entire state.²

The Church in North Carolina was organized, since 1868, as a vicariate-apostolic, a jurisdiction that is subdiocesan in rank, and prediocesan in character. Such territories serve until the Church is sufficiently established to warrant an episcopal see.

The Carolina vicariate was such a disheartening project that it even had difficulty in reserving the services of a bishop. Its pioneer conditions and the poverty of the faithful required that every vicar-apostolic—eventually if not from the beginning—be given an additional, more solvent see (either Richmond or Charleston) to rule in tandem with Carolina. Neither were priests easily secured for the state. Vocations were rare, largely transfers from other dioceses, and often men who had unhappy histories.

Even with the desperate condition of the Church there, a monastic order like the Benedictines did not seem to offer the talent or charism that progress demanded. Only after more active orders, the Jesuits and the Redemptorists, declined the free land and vast field of labor in North Carolina, was an invitation proffered to the monks.

Neither monastic life nor the monks' young college favored long missionary absences. These monk-priests who taught and farmed were to be missionaries of a different species. Nevertheless, they proved willing workers, who—at least on weekends—tended as wide a territory as their numbers permitted. The monastic records show so many monk-priests out on some

¹OCD, 1877.

²Remark of Archabbot Boniface Wimmer, recorded by Dom Felix Fellner in "Abbot Boniface and His Monks," ASV, unpublished manuscript, p. 519.

Sundays that a retired secular priest was needed for the Mass for the brothers at the abbey.

In 1884, Wimmer succeeded in winning abbatial rank for Maryhelp. This meant that the Carolina monastery became an autonomous, self-governing Benedictine house. Dom Oswald Moosmueller (1832–1901) was elected abbot, but he declined the office.³ In July of 1885, in an election carefully choreographed by Wimmer, Dom Leo Haid (1849–1924) was elected abbot of Maryhelp.⁴

Haid, a thirty-five-year old, American-born monk and priest, was a professor at Wimmer's college in Pennsylvania.⁵ He had never seen either Maryhelp or the South; nevertheless, he accepted election. Haid proved a wise and providential choice. Assisted by his more practical and administratively clever lieutenant, Dom Felix Hintemeyer (1861–1924), he oversaw an extraordinary rise in the fortunes of Maryhelp and the Catholic Church in North Carolina.

In December of 1887, Pope Leo XIII initiated a new vision for securing the Church in the North State. He appointed Abbot Leo the vicar-apostolic of North Carolina.⁶ Ordinarily, an abbot would resign his monastic jurisdiction upon assuming charge of a diocese. Haid, however, was instructed to rule his abbey and vicariate concurrently. The concept of the "two mitres," as it came to be known, was conceived by James Cardinal Gibbons (1834–1921), who had been the first bishop of the vicariate and who in 1887 was metropolitan of the province in which it lay. Through Gibbons' arrangement, Haid was given the concession of maintaining his monastic office; thus the Benedictines were placated by the continued presence of their founding abbot, while the vicariate profited from the acquisition of a bishop whose expenses were imposed on his religious order. Moreover, since the abbot-bishop maintained his residence at Belmont, the state had, for the first time, the prospect of a resident bishop who promised stability.

Gibbons' plan also subtly ensured that the Benedictines would be tied to the vicariate, with its imposing need for missionaries. Since Haid was responsible for seeing that those needs were met, and since he retained authority over the monastic work force—whose priestly numbers outweighed the vicariate's—it seemed natural that the monks would soon find themselves in the parishes of the state. The Gibbons plan probably also influenced Haid's decision in 1890 to found a major seminary at the abbey.

³Documents of Election, February 11, 1885, ASV.

⁴Documents of Election, July 14, 1885, ASV.

⁵Personnel files, personal papers, and other materials, AAM.

⁶Documents for this are maintained in both AAB and AAM.

In his distinctive situation, ruling over a fledgling monastery and an impecunious vicariate in the most Protestant state in the Union, Haid acquired some celebrity⁷ in the Catholic press. The monk who was a bishop fired romantic, medieval images that were fed through press reports that marveled at his long white beard as much as at his imposing voice, effective oratory, and extraordinary responsibilities. News reports also noted the extent and activity of the bishop's work. The public heard that while administering a vicariate and monastery, Haid still taught a full schedule of courses in Belmont's college and seminary; he also worked in the fields alongside the other monks and undertook an enormous round of pastoral commitments and those journeys northward that he called "begging trips." This enigmatic figure of a monk-missionary-bishop won for his two jurisdictions attention and support that helped them stabilize and fructify.

By 1910, when Haid celebrated his silver jubilee as abbot, his state had a modest but visible Catholic presence and the nucleus of a local clergy.⁸ Of particular note was the work of the indefatigable Sisters of Mercy,⁹ who established and staffed schools, a hospital, and an orphanage. So promising were the prospects for the Church in North Carolina by this time that Haid even constructed twin cathedrals, at Wilmington and Asheville, to support the dioceses he envisioned.

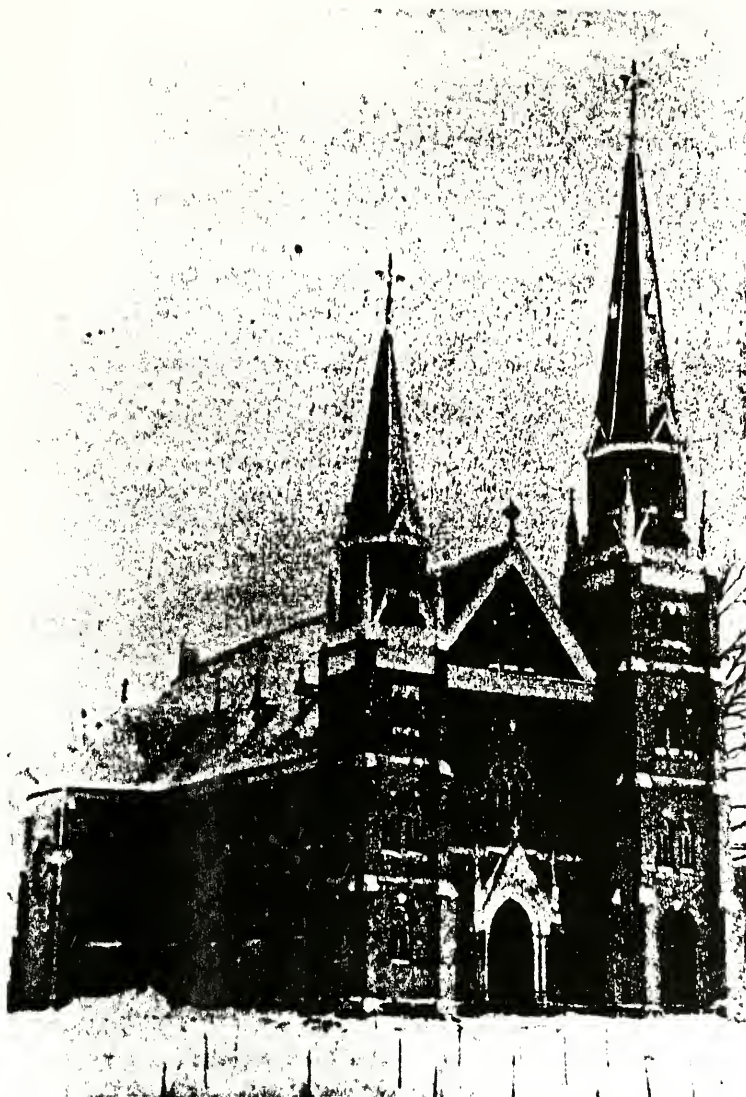
In the monastery, however, a crucial problem lurked amid the prosperity. If an abbey became too entangled in diocesan affairs, if her members became parochial priests more immediately than they were monks, a disorientation resulted that undercut the realization of monastic ideals. Because of their extensive involvement in the affairs of the vicariate, the lines that distinguished the Belmont Benedictines from the diocese were increasingly blurred. The situation, Haid reasoned, would only worsen when the vicariate's throne passed to succeeding, presumably non-Benedictine, ordinaries.

Despite his own breadth of pastoral commitments and the economy of labor his monks provided in the vicariate, Leo Haid was determined to ensure that his monastery would not be permanently tied to any diocesan pressures. He decided to answer the situation by securing a separate, but no less fervent, pastoral field for the monk-priests. He wanted to ensure that future bishops could not impose unduly on the monks, withdrawing them from their cloister and school.

⁷An extensive collection of newspaper clippings is preserved in AAM.

⁸OCD, 1911.

⁹The Sisters of Mercy predate the Benedictines in North Carolina. In 1892, they moved their motherhouse to Belmont, on the fringes of the monks' land.



The Abbey Cathedral of Maryhelp, Belmont Abbey *Nullius*, constructed in 1892-1893. (From a print made by Abbot Walter Coggin, O.S.B., from a glass negative in the Archives of Belmont Abbey.)

Need for Benedictine Security

The first remedy Haid sought was a grant of exclusive parochial rights for the abbey within a territory of its own. That would serve the vicariate by ensuring that the monks continued their missionary labor; it would benefit the Benedictines by creating a buffer against episcopal incursions. Future bishops would not expect the monks to venture beyond their own territory.

In 1891, Maryhelp petitioned the Holy See to grant this specific, limited responsibility. Haid maintained, somewhat speciously, that the counties he requested conformed to the territory Maryhelp was already cultivating. A grant of this area in perpetuity, he argued, would recognize the monks' achievement and guarantee continued Benedictine missionary work.

In December of 1891, Belmont's petition was approved, although only partially. The abbey received a generous grant of nine counties. But on advice given Rome by Cardinal Gibbons, the monks' pastoral authority was limited to only fifty years.¹⁰ Thus, instead of enjoying a separated territory, the monks were to cultivate a virgin field, then pass it on to the seculars to maintain. This was not the security the Benedictines had sought.

When Rome entrusted this territory to Belmont, the monks acquired pastoral obligations over 4,130 square miles of rural Carolina. Each of the counties already had a church or mission.¹¹ Yet only two sites were sufficiently developed to require a resident priest. The ten mission churches opened only on Sundays and holy days, staffed by the teaching fathers.¹² The Benedictines offered pastoral provisions for the Catholics of their territory, but—as the Holy See would later note with displeasure—there was no concerted effort to spread the faith. Only Saint Peter Church in Charlotte (Mecklenburg County) acquired a new, resident, Benedictine rector.

In 1910, the monks of Belmont tried once again to win a separate territory. This time, they sought a smaller, more manageable area to hold in perpetuity. Hintemeyer determined that Belmont should be named an *abbatia nullius dioecesis*, i.e. an "abbey of no diocese." Since an abbey

¹⁰James Gibbons to Giovanni Simeoni, Baltimore, January 8, 1891, AAB, RG: James Gibbons (1877-1921). The territory consisted of Cabarrus, Cleveland, Davidson, Forsyth, Gaston, Guilford, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, and Rowan Counties.

¹¹OCD, 1892.

¹²Weekly assignments are not preserved in AAM. Nonetheless, there is an invaluable catalogue of its priestly work in a compendium by Dom Ambrose Keefe, O.S.B., updated through 1989. It delineates regular assignments by location.

nullius stands outside the territory of all dioceses, she is herself a quasi-diocesan structure. The abbot *nullius* rules his separated territory as ordinary, having all responsibilities, authority, and power that a bishop would, except in matters that follow on episcopal orders (e.g., ordinations). Only about fifty such jurisdictions existed, none of which were in North America.¹³ In effect it created a 'diocese' of Belmont Abbey.

In a particularly clever move, the new 'diocese' was sought as a tribute to Abbot-Bishop Leo Haid (celebrating twenty-five years as abbot) and the success of his monastery (commemorating twenty-five years of abbatial rank).¹⁴ In that way, there was no necessity for proving any pastoral need for such a territory or for substantiating the felicity of its prospects.

No abbey *nullius* had ever been erected in North America at that time.¹⁵ What Haid and Hintemeyer sought was the elevation of their monastery to a rank where no bishop could ever interfere or pressure an abbot to send his men on extra-claustral missions.¹⁶ It was the ultimate form of separation.

The requested territory was 2,546 square miles, 62% of which was in the 1891 territory. Haid envisioned relinquishing the rest of the 1891 territory when the fifty years expired. That would leave Belmont with a compact area composed of the six counties that included and surrounded the abbey. Only one city of any size, Charlotte, was included. Outside of Gaston County (where the abbey was) and Mecklenburg (where Charlotte lay), there were so few Catholics that it would be decades before any additional resident pastors would be required. Even when that time came, an abbey *nullius*, as a 'diocese,' could employ secular priests for the work.

Once again, the only difficulty in fulfilling the Benedictines' ambitions came from James Cardinal Gibbons. He heartily endorsed the *nullius* in concept but objected to the proposed territory. Gibbons believed that Charlotte, not Asheville, would eventually be the see city for western Carolina; accordingly, he held that Mecklenburg County should be withheld from the Benedictines.¹⁷

¹³Statistical accumulations, ASA.

¹⁴The Abbot Primate alerted Belmont to this approach.

¹⁵Belmont's was the only *nullius* ever erected in the United States. Canada, however, received a *nullius* in Saskatchewan in 1921.

¹⁶Felix Hintemeyer to Leo Haid, Washington, D.C., undated (May, 1908), AAM, RG: A1.0; AAB, Haid to Gibbons, Belmont Abbey, June 24, 1908, AAM, RG: Gibbons, #106 F6; Haid to Primate, Belmont Abbey, April 8, 1909, ASA, RG: Hildebrand de Hemptinne (1893-1913).

¹⁷Gibbons to Gaetano DeLai, Baltimore, January 25, 1910, AAB, RG: Gibbons.

The cardinal created a clever prospectus with which to counter: He proposed that the Benedictines should have a "real territory." He offered 3,286 square miles, stretching over eight counties.¹⁸ It was 740 square miles, or 29%, in excess of the requested territory. Instead of a secure buffer, this area would erect a broad new missionary field to obligate the monks. It lacked churches, priests, and Catholics. Hintemeyer called it a "gift like an empty basket."¹⁹ The cardinal's vision far exceeded the personnel, desire, and capabilities of the Benedictines. But Gibbons recognized that his proposal required the monks to continue their missionary work, a commitment that served the young Church in Carolina. He even took from the abbey its responsibility for the most established parish, Saint Peter in Mecklenburg County, leaving the Benedictines with the most virgin field imaginable.

The monks offered to trade their entire territory for just Gaston County (where the abbey lay) and Mecklenburg (on its east border).²⁰ But Diomed Falconio, the Apostolic Delegate, responded that the abbot could have a *nullius* with the Gibbons territory, or he would have no *nullius* whatsoever.²¹

In the next—and final—submission of the petition for the *nullius*, Belmont requested the territory delineated by the Archbishop of Baltimore.²²

On June 8, 1910, the United States received her first, and only, *abbatia nullius dioecesis*, and in Leo Haid began the country's first and only succession of abbots *nullius*.

Erection of the *Nullius*

Both before and after the erection of the *nullius*, Leo Haid was the ordinary for the entire state. So neither the monks nor the diocesan clergy foresaw any reason why the Church in Carolina would be altered practically by the creation of the cathedral abbey of Belmont.

Evaluations required revision, however, after the papal bull arrived. For it

¹⁸*Ibid.* These were Burke, Catawba, Cleveland, Gaston, Lincoln, McDowell, and Polk Counties. The monks had requested Cabarrus, Cleveland, Gaston, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, and Rutherford.

¹⁹Hintemeyer to Primate, Belmont Abbey, undated (March, 1910), ASA, RG: De Hemptinne.

²⁰Hintemeyer to Primate, Belmont Abbey, two letters, both undated (both March, 1910), ASA, RG: De Hemptinne.

²¹Delegate to Haid, Washington, D.C., March 24, 1910, AAM, RG: A5.0.

²²In addition to the document itself, see Hintemeyer to Primate, Belmont Abbey, March 22, 1910, March 28, 1910, ASA, RG: De Hemptinne.

contained what the vicariate clergy christened the "Joker Clause."²³ In a rambling, complex sentence of the sort that so often sprang from the chancery of Pius X, the Benedictines were given more than their *nullius*. In what may have been an error, the successive abbots of Belmont received administrative rights in the vicariate through all time.²⁴ The monks were surprised; so too were the diocesan clergy, who erupted in vehement opposition. The "Joker Clause" invested the monastic chapter at Belmont with the right to elect the ordinary for the whole state. That meant that North Carolina would always be guided by a Benedictine. It meant that the secular clergy in the state would always be subject to the abbot of Belmont. So the bull separated the Benedictines from the influence of the diocese, but subjected the vicariate—for as long as it existed—to the administration of the monks. In effect, the two bodies were tied inextricably. Only the suppression of the vicariate could free it from the Benedictines.

The secular clergy of Carolina petitioned for an immediate rectification of the situation. They asked for the suppression of the vicariate and the immediate erection of a North Carolina diocese whose territory would be the entire state, saving the eight counties of the *nullius*;²⁵ her see was to be in Wilmington, a port city at the southeastern extreme of the state.

At first there was opposition to the creation of the new diocese. The state was still unable to support a bishop. The Church seemed unprepared for such independent standing. The ordinary, Bishop Haid, pointed out these and other reservations, suggesting that conscience could not allow this step.²⁶ Gibbons concurred but then buckled under the protestations from the vicariate clergy.²⁷ The ordinaries of the province were summoned to Baltimore for a meeting on Wednesday in the Octave of Easter, 1911, April 19. Gibbons pressed Haid to "[see] no difficulty in the way of presenting the petition to the Holy See."²⁸

Haid conformed and voted with the majority.²⁹ That vote was suffi-

²³Christopher Dennen to Hintemeyer, Wilmington, N.C., October 26, 1910, AAM, RG: A1.0.

²⁴For published text of the *Bulla Erectionis* see: "Erectio Abbatiae Belmontensis in 'Abbatiam Nullius,'" *American Ecclesiastical Review*, XLIII (December, 1910), 690–695.

²⁵Petition of November, 1910, from the secular clergy of North Carolina to the Metropolitan of the Province, James Cardinal Gibbons, AAB, RG: Gibbons, #108 V4.

²⁶Haid to Gibbons, Belmont Abbey, January 28, 1911, AAB, RG: Gibbons.

²⁷See Gibbons to Haid, Baltimore, May 18, 1911, AAM, RG: A1.0.

²⁸Gibbons to Haid, Baltimore, January 23, 1911, AAM, RG: A1.0.

²⁹Announcement of meeting, March 11, 1911, ADS, RG: Keiley; Minutes of provincial meeting, April 19, 1911, ABA, RG: Province Meetings; see also Haid to Primate, Belmont Abbey, May 10, 1911, ASA, RG: De Hemptinne.

ciently at odds with Haid's known sentiments for Falconio to poll him privately before sending the petition for the new diocese to Rome. He reminded Haid that one was bound to respond "in conscience in regard to this important matter."³⁰ The petition for a diocese of Wilmington in North Carolina was submitted on May 31, 1911.³¹ On August 17 the Consistorial Congregation informed the bishops that the request seemed premature. The vicariate was to continue until the territory was better prepared for the support of a regular diocese.³²

So North Carolina finally—and reluctantly in some cases—settled into its new diocesan structure, with two jurisdictions, neither of which was a diocese in the full sense. Haid ruled the entire state. Only Benedictines were assigned to serve in the fourteen counties mentioned in the grants of 1891 and 1910. Seculars, a few Benedictines, and other religious were assigned to serve the rest of the state.³³

Under Leo Haid, little progress was made in the abbatial territory. In 1924, the year Haid died, the *nullius* showed no additional churches outside Gaston County. The 1891 counties included two additional churches with conventional rectors. But the separated territory was still staffed by missionaries on weekend assignments.³⁴

In fairness to the monks, it must be admitted that Haid seems to have taxed his monastic clergy to the limits of its resources and numbers. In 1924, Belmont counted forty-six monk-priests in her number. Five had full-time parochial assignments in North Carolina (two of whom still resided at the abbey). Four were at the priory in northern Virginia; eight were in Belmont's Savannah monastery; nine in Richmond. Three priests were at least slowed by age or infirmity; two were major administrators of the farm, and four of the cloister; at least four were needed to supervise the boys. That left six priests at most (all of whom filled assignments in the school, monastery, or on the farm during the week) to staff what would ideally be sixteen weekend positions for Masses and confessions at churches, missions, convents, and hospitals in the fourteen counties. The difference was supplied with doubled assignments among the administrators, teachers, and farmers of Belmont.³⁵ The real problem was not the

³⁰Delegate to Haid, Washington, D.C., May 13, 1911, AAM, RG: A1.0.

³¹Petition from Gibbons to Pius X, May 31, 1911, AAB, RG: Roman Correspondence.

³²Delegate to Gibbons, Baltimore, September 1, 1911, AAB, RG: Gibbons (copy).

³³ OCD, 1912 ff.

³⁴Cf. note 12, *supra*.

³⁵Personnel records, AAM, RG: B22.

monks' effort, but the imperceptive "cleverness" of Gibbons. He succeeded in binding the Benedictines to a large missionary territory without considering that they had insufficient resources for work of that magnitude.

Vincent Taylor

Leo Haid died on July 24, 1924. His combined territories were populated by about 3,000,000 people in that year, of whom 8,254 were Catholic.³⁶ Benedictine rule in North Carolina was conveniently and promptly terminated (outside the *nullius*) by the suppression of the vicariate. Archbishop Michael Curley (1879–1947), Gibbons' successor in Baltimore, acting in concert with the secular clergy in Carolina, had begun ensuring this outcome in 1922. The archbishop had been warned that the Benedictines were grasping and avid; so he prevented their purported ambitions for control of the Church in North Carolina.³⁷

In place of the vicariate, Rome created the Diocese of Raleigh. Its responsibilities covered the exact territory requested in 1911 for the proposed Diocese of Wilmington. Belmont retained the *nullius*, of course, but not the entire state. The new head of the abbatial 'diocese' was not offered episcopal ordination. This resolution of the jurisdiction over North Carolina pleased both Raleigh (which was freed from the Benedictines) and the monastery (which was separated from the secular bishop).

Haid's successor as abbot *nullius* was Vincent George Taylor, a gentlemanly Virginian whose considerable Southern charm and manners disguised adroit practical and political talents. Taylor had spent twenty-two years in parish assignments; so he was profitably orientated for the priestly obligations derived from the separated territory. Indeed, he was a more obvious choice for the *nullius* than for the cloister. Happily he proved congenial in both jurisdictions.³⁸

Taylor gave prompt attention to the troublesome over-dispersal of Belmont's personnel. The monks' priory in northern Virginia was closed in 1927. Plans (already existent) to consolidate the abbey's two Richmond projects were executed. As a result, attention to the *nullius* and the 1891 counties could be increased.

³⁶OCD, 1925.

³⁷A collection of the correspondence in this regard between the metropolitan of the province (Archbishop Michael Curley of Baltimore) and Christopher Dennen is preserved in AAB.

³⁸Records of the administration of Vincent George Taylor, second abbot-*nullius*, AAM, RG: A2.0.

At the abbey, Taylor's interest in parochial work encouraged a realignment of values. The fathers became more attached to their missionary assignments, and parochial work became more purposefully integrated into the Belmont agenda. The possession of the *nullius* also supported and encouraged this shift in values, since pastoral work was now seen as a permanent aspect of Belmont's mission.

Taylor was a man of a different spirit than Haid. While the latter had multiplied his monastic commitments—establishing monasteries and schools in northern Virginia, Richmond, Savannah, and Florida—Abbot Vincent modified the proliferation of cloisters in order to better staff the missions. His reign augured well for the *nullius*.

The abbot's plan for strengthening the abbey's diocesan work involved the assignment of a full complement of regular, but non-resident, pastors. In its original design, each monk-priest worked at the monastery through the week, then served his mission on weekends and according to special needs. Regrettably, Taylor's plan unravelled when practical considerations at Belmont required that most of the priestly assignments rotate. A letter from the Sacred Consistorial Congregation, dated June 24, 1935, gave the first evidence of dissatisfaction with the monks' work. In both the *cura animarum* and the promotion of spiritual fruits, it said, progress in the separated territory was undistinguished.³⁹

In January, 1941, Eugene Joseph McGuinness (1889–1957), Bishop of Raleigh, unctuously reminded Taylor of the “unfortunate ruling that was made in the years that are gone” that called for the parishes of the 1891 territory to be reclaimed by the seculars.⁴⁰ McGuinness was in regular correspondence with the Apostolic Delegation concerning Benedictine incompetence and the necessity of Raleigh's acquisition of those counties.⁴¹ Now, to Taylor the bishop emphasized how important it was, for the good of the Church, that this change occur without rancor or recriminations. After all, he said, “You know and I know that such is unjust, but all of

³⁹Sacred Consistorial Congregation to Taylor, Vatican, June 24, 1935, AAM, RG: A2.0. It appears that the Consistorial's interest in Belmont can be traced to the delegate, who was informed by Archbishop Curley of Baltimore, who was informed by Father Christopher Dennen and Bishop William Hafey of Raleigh. Eugene McGuinness, as Bishop of Raleigh, communicated his objections concerning Benedictine pastoral efforts directly to the delegate.

⁴⁰Eugene McGuinness to Taylor, Raleigh, January 16, 1941, AAM, RG: A2.0.

⁴¹See, for example, McGuinness to Delegate, Raleigh, April 3, 1940; April 8, 1941; October 9, 1943, ADR. [N.B., the McGuinness papers, when consulted, had not yet been catalogued into the Raleigh archives.]

us know the agreement was made and everyone is expecting it to be fulfilled."⁴² In April, McGuinness stopped at the abbey while on a pastoral tour of the Raleigh diocese. During the visit, Abbot Vincent conceded the 1891 counties to Raleigh without a struggle. Bishop McGuinness wrote the Apostolic Delegate on April 8, announcing success in the negotiations: "Abbot Taylor is very much pleased . . . ; he would do anything he could to make easier the transfers."⁴³

Of the nine counties granted the abbey in 1891, three were included in the *nullius*. They (Cleveland, Gaston, Lincoln) remained under the jurisdiction of the monks; the other six were to be divested. As an "expression of good will," Belmont was given Saint Peter Church in Charlotte *in perpetuum*.⁴⁴

Even after the transfer of authority was assured, McGuinness kept the Holy See alert to every development in these negotiations, incredibly so in light of how routine and unmomentous they were. But he had a broader agenda than the reclamation of six counties for his diocesan priests. The transfer of 1941 also provided Raleigh with a natural, seemingly unmeddlesome forum for voicing its concerns over Benedictine administration of the *nullius*. He effectively insinuated his message, laying the groundwork for a more significant transfer of authority in the years to come.

The First Partition

Two years later, on October 9, 1943, McGuinness wrote the Delegation, again raising the spectre of the Benedictines' incompetence. While just "submitting the conditions as they prevail," he commented with admirable restraint: "I have found that, as a group, the Benedictines are not particularly apt at missionary work."⁴⁵

Bishop McGuinness' report on the *nullius* was a damning appraisal. In a population of 340,488, Catholics numbered just 747. Although there were five churches other than the abbey cathedral, only one had a resident pastor. Three churches served the residents of seven of the counties. "There should be churches and resident priests," he said, "in at least five of the other counties." Frankly, "little or no missionary work [at all has been] done throughout the territory." Although he was "not asking for any

⁴²McGuinness to Taylor, Raleigh, January 16, 1941, AAM, RG: A2.0.

⁴³McGuinness to Delegate, Raleigh, April 8, 1941, ADR.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵McGuinness to Delegate, Raleigh, October 9, 1943, ADR.

action," the bishop recommended "that all the rights and privileges appertaining to the *Nullius* be retained, but that its jurisdiction be limited to one county, namely Gaston."⁴⁶

The report was favorably received at the Delegation. On October 23, 1943, Amleto Giovanni Cicognani, then in his tenth year as Delegate, wrote Abbot Vincent. Without mentioning the report from Raleigh, Cicognani suggested that "this might be as good a time as any" for re-evaluating the state of the separated territory. The *nullius* is, he suggested, "a really missionary country and calls for the services of missionary priests who have the aptitude and zeal required for missionary work." Unfortunately, "it does not seem possible," he surmised, "for the abbey to work the territory as it should be worked." The delegate offered to consider any remedy Belmont might suggest, but "the honor of the abbey would be better upheld" if seven counties of the *nullius* "would be surrendered to the neighboring diocese."⁴⁷

It stretches credulity to think that Taylor did not see McGuinness' hand in this suggestion. The bishop had presented this same scheme to the abbot in April, 1941.⁴⁸ Yet there is no evidence that Belmont ever realized that the proposed partition emanated from McGuinness.

The Belmont chapter discussed the matter on December 1, 6, and 15, 1943. It agreed to "surrender" the counties as recommended if the delegate would "destroy all correspondance [*sic*] between him and the Right Rev. Abbot and make the idea of surrendering the counties [*seem to*] originate with the Belmont Abbey Chapter; that in this way we can gracefully save our name and the honor of the Abbey."⁴⁹ Taylor then journeyed to Washington for negotiations with the delegate. Dom Cuthbert Allen, O.S.B. (1906–1977), a college monk with pastoral experience in Gaston County, accompanied the abbot. The delegate readily approved the plan.⁵⁰ He then warned McGuinness, in a handwritten appendix to Christmas greetings, to expect a visit from Abbot Vincent. Said Cicognani, "I am sure you will be pleased."⁵¹

After the conference between McGuinness and Taylor, the former wrote

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷Delegate to Taylor, Washington, D.C., October 23, 1943, AAM, RG: A2.0.

⁴⁸McGuinness to Delegate, Raleigh, April 8, 1941, ADR.

⁴⁹Minutes of the Monastic Chapter, December 1, 6, and especially 15, 1943, AAM.

⁵⁰Minutes of the Monastic Chapter, December 15, 1943 (report by Dom Cuthbert Allen), AAM.

⁵¹Delegate to McGuinness, Washington, D.C., December 18, 1943, ADR.

the delegate that Abbot Vincent seemed "relieved" to have the matter settled so happily and expeditiously.⁵²

The abbey's request for partition was submitted to the Holy See on January 3, 1944.⁵³ One month later the petition was approved and the documents were in hand.⁵⁴ Through it all, McGuinness maintained a studied innocence. "I pray that you think that you are released of a burden because I feel that I am given an added, unwanted, unnecessary obligation," he said.⁵⁵ The abbot, still unknowing, replied by "express[ing] appreciation and thanks for the kindness, consideration and cooperation you have manifested in this affair."⁵⁶

The press release, drafted in Raleigh for approval by Abbot Vincent, stated that this "unusual request was necessary because of the constant and increasing demand for professors for the three outstanding schools . . . conducted by the Benedictine Fathers. . . . [It] will enable those burdened with . . . spiritual care [now] to give all their time to scholastic pursuits, while the usual privileges and prerogatives of an *Abbatius* [*sic*] *Nullius* are preserved in Gaston County."⁵⁷

The Reduced *Nullius*

Finally, with the one-county remnant of the *nullius*, it could no longer be said either that Belmont had more parish responsibilities than it could handle or that parochial duties necessarily mitigated monasticism. It was reasonable to assume that the *nullius* had reached a reasonable level, one that could be perpetuated.

Gaston County numbered Catholics as only about one percent of the population. The abbey served her faithful through two parishes, one mission, and two incipient parishes (founded 1944, 1949). This was for a Catholic population that, in 1950, totaled only 1,150.⁵⁸

Taylor also decreed that the abbey cathedral would be a center of the

⁵²McGuinness to Delegate, Raleigh, December 23, 1943, ADR.

⁵³Decree of partition, 1944, AAM, RG: B20.

⁵⁴Delegate to Taylor, Washington, D.C., February 3, 1944, AAM, RG: A2.0.

⁵⁵McGuinness to Taylor, Raleigh, February 7, 1944, AAM, RG: A2.0.

⁵⁶Taylor to McGuinness, Belmont Abbey, March 30, 1944, AAM, RG: A2.0.

⁵⁷Press release, drafted by Diocese of Raleigh (January 3, 1944), endorsed by Taylor (January 12), released through NCWC News Service (April 17), AAM, RG: A2.0. The release is preserved in NCB.

⁵⁸OCD, 1951.

liturgical arts. He moved the monks' choirstalls there (1943) and encouraged the faithful to attend the hours of the monastic office. He decreed that the ceremonies of the Church should be executed with full solemnity. There was a sung Mass every day. Dom Adelard Bouvilliers and then Dom Kenneth Geyer presided as cathedral organist. His *ceremoniarius*, first Dom Nicholas Bliley and then Dom Anselm Biggs, trained monks, the faithful, servers, and congregants in the benefits of the liturgy as well as its rubrical demands.

Another emphasis in the *nullius* was Catholic education. The prosperous union of the Sisters of Mercy with the Benedictines provided this smallest of 'dioceses' with an opportunity for Catholic education from preschool through college.

In many ways, the precincts of the *nullius* seemed to create an ideal small diocese. Its quinquennial reports won warm affirmation from Rome.⁵⁹ Only in evangelization, in spreading the faith, was progress slow.

Yet the *nullius* was never recognized as an ideal Catholic setting. To the contrary, Abbot Vincent noted, as had Bishop Haid before him, "My experience since I have been in office gives me the feeling that this community has become a pariah in ecclesiastical circles."⁶⁰ It may be argued that the abbots' perception was accurate. In the 1950's, the final unraveling of the abbey *nullius* began.

The vigor of Taylor's reign ended in 1947 with his first heart attack. In the succeeding years, especially after 1953, failing health slowly persuaded him to petition Rome for a coadjutor-abbot, a monk who would share the burden of office in the present and eventually succeed to the throne.⁶¹ But in 1956, when his petition was granted, Taylor received a vicar instead of a coadjutor.⁶² The vicar was to govern the cloister, while Abbot Vincent continued to administer the 'diocese.'⁶³

Rumors in the Benedictine order suggested that this unusual arrangement was designed to keep Rome from re-evaluating the *nullius*—as it might do if asked to confirm a new ordinary. If this were true, it was reasoned, when the time for a change of ordinaries did come—presumably when Taylor died—would the abbatial 'diocese' be allowed to survive?⁶⁴

⁵⁹Collective quinquennial files, 1924–1959, AAM, RG: A.2.0.

⁶⁰Taylor to McGuinness, Belmont Abbey, March 30, 1944, AAM, RG: A2.0.

⁶¹Taylor to Delegate, Belmont Abbey, June 16, 1953, AAM, RG: A2.0.

⁶²The exchanges on this are preserved in the Taylor papers in AAM, RG: A2.0.

⁶³See especially Taylor to Sacred Congregation for Religious, Belmont Abbey, April 5, 1956, AAM, RG: A2.0.

⁶⁴The monks even mention these rumors in a petition to the Holy See, dating them at fifteen years' duration. Petition of the Chapter, January 15, 1960, AAM.

From these rumors, the idea arose that it might be wise⁶⁵ to replace the vicar, Walter A. Coggin, O.S.B. (1916–), with a coadjutor.⁶⁶ The stimulus for this plan came from the Abbot Primate, Bernard Kaelin. A coadjutor, Kaelin maintained, would preserve the separated territory better than a vicar, since the latter's office would die with the abbot. Kaelin placed inquiries at the Sacred Consistorial Congregation and talked with the Apostolic Delegate to the United States, Egidio Vagnozzi. Both sources assured him, without elaboration, "that the Bishops of the United States do not favor the *Abbatia Nullius*."⁶⁷ Accordingly, it seemed reasonable that the security of the separated territory would be served by a timely election. Kaelin was confident he could win the necessary permissions for a vote.⁶⁸

Taylor was incensed at this bargaining. Any call for a rearrangement of administrative rights, he maintained, should originate with him. This concern over the *nullius*' survival he labeled "irresponsible."⁶⁹ Vincent Taylor refused to either petition for the election of a coadjutor⁷⁰ or resign.⁷¹ Coggin then offered to submit his resignation as vicar if that would, for the good of the *nullius*, create a more compelling circumstance for the election of a coadjutor.⁷² But Kaelin urged the vicar not to "complicate matters" any further.⁷³

On November 5, 1959, Taylor succumbed to a final heart attack. Without problem, delay, or reservation, the Belmont Chapter was given permission to elect a new abbot *nullius*.⁷⁴ Accordingly, the monks had no idea that the abbatial diocese was indeed being called into question. The third ordinary of Raleigh, Vincent Stanislaus Waters, an alumnus of the monks' preparatory school, believed the Church would best be served by the governance of his diocese over the entire state. "He [had] always felt annoyed by the presence [of the separated territory]," and devoted his energy toward an appropriate emendation.⁷⁵

⁶⁵See Taylor to Primate, Belmont Abbey, April 7, 1959, AAM, RG: A2.0.

⁶⁶See, for example, Denis Strittmatter to Taylor, Latrobe, Pennsylvania, February 14, 1959, and March 7, 1959, AAM, RG: A2.0.

⁶⁷See Primate to Strittmatter, Rome, January 21, 1959, ASA, RG: Bernard Kaelin (1947–1959).

⁶⁸See Strittmatter to Taylor, Latrobe, Pennsylvania, February 14, 1959, AAM, RG: A2.0.

⁶⁹Taylor to Strittmatter, Belmont Abbey, March 14, 1959, ACF, RG: Denis Strittmatter (1953–1965).

⁷⁰Taylor to Strittmatter, Belmont Abbey, March 2, 1959, ACF, RG: Strittmatter.

⁷¹Taylor to Primate, Belmont Abbey, April 7, 1959, ASA, RG: Kaelin.

⁷²Coggin to Lambert Dunne, Belmont Abbey, March 19, 1959, AAM, RG: Kaelin.

⁷³Primate to Coggin, Rome, April 5, 1959, AAM, RG: Kaelin.

⁷⁴Election Mandate for Belmont Abbey, 1959, ACF.

⁷⁵"Résumé of Interview" of the Administrator and Abbot-Elect with the Delegate, January 21, 1960, AAM, RG: A2.5.

Coggin was elected to succeed Abbot Vincent. The new abbot was a gentle man, one with no taste for high administrative office. Upon taking his doctorate in philosophy, Walter Coggin had happily accepted appointment to the faculty of the monks' college, only to be named novice master and then elected vicar in rapid succession. After more than three years as vicar, and still only age forty-three, Coggin was burdened with the tribulations of heading a 'diocese,' abbey, college, and two priories hundreds of miles away.

The Second Partition

Bernard Kaelin assured Walter Coggin that the 1959 conferences concerning the proposed coadjutorship "were good for the future"; they "stressed the fact that Belmont should remain as is, the *Nullius* with territory and not merely an empty title."⁷⁶ Unfortunately, Kaelin overestimated his impact. He also misjudged the American hierarchy's regard for the *nullius*. The death of Taylor occasioned immediate "recommendations from the United States," as they were termed at the Consistorial, asking for a revision in the abbatial 'diocese.'⁷⁷

On January 4, 1960, Archbishop Vagnozzi wrote Belmont "to elicit information which will help to shape the future condition of Belmont Abbey *Nullius*." Assuming the monks knew that the "continuance of the present arrangement" had been in "question for some time," Vagnozzi envisioned three alternatives: (1) maintenance of the status quo; (2) reduction of the *nullius*' territory to the acreage of the monastery; or (3) suppression of the abbatial 'diocese.' He then instructed the monks to state their preference, choosing only between the second and third options.⁷⁸

Dom Joseph Tobin, O.S.B., acting as administrator during the interregnum, informed the Belmont capitulars immediately. He convoked a chapter for discussion of the 'diocese' on the afternoon of Monday, January 11, 1960.⁷⁹ By that time, the Consistorial in Rome, the delegate in Washington, the primate (Benno Gut), and the abbot president (Archabbot Denis Strittmatter in Pennsylvania) were awaiting a move by Belmont or instructions concerning the next step.

⁷⁶Primate to Coggin, Rome, April 24, 1959, ASA, RG: Kaelin.

⁷⁷Dunne to Coggin, Rome, May 9, 1960, AAM, RG: A3.0. According to Dunne, who was secretary to the primate and was procurator for the American Cassinese Benedictines, the Consistorial Congregation maintained that they "had no special interest in restricting the *Nullius* but that they must go by the recommendations from the U.S."

⁷⁸Delegate to Tobin, Washington, D.C., January 4, 1960, AAM, RG: A2.5.

⁷⁹Minutes of the Monastic Chapter, January 11, 1960, AAM.

At the chapter of January 11 the monks of Belmont displayed an innocence that was more edifying than perspicacious. They declined to choose between reduction or suppression of the *nullius*. By unanimous vote, they called for retention of the separated territory with its borders unchanged. An embassy was deputed to approach the delegate, petitioning for a stay in the proceedings and a cessation of the efforts to vivisect the *nullius*.⁸⁰

Dom Anselm Biggs, who was the abbey's historian as well as its chapter secretary, molded the monks' sentiments into a petition of particular eloquence. It managed to be both forceful and suppliant. Biggs said that the Benedictines were fighting to preserve a "sacred heritage, created by Saint Pius X, confided to our ancestors, and entrusted by them to us to cherish, develop, and protect." The monks claimed their patrimony with a solemn signing of the petition on January 15, 1960.⁸¹

On January 18, upon receiving this rather amazing response, the delegate spoke with Tobin by telephone. Vagnozzi offered the administrator and abbot-elect an appointment on January 21, but he declined to invite the chapter's committee.⁸² Tobin and Coggin were greeted cordially; they had luncheon with the delegate; then the mood changed. Vagnozzi said that they might as well move to the business of the day; the *nullius* would not remain as it was, he said. The only question remaining was the Benedictines' preference for either a territory coterminous with the monastic property or the absolute suppression of Belmont's 'diocesan' character.⁸³

Since the monks preferred a denuded *nullius* to none at all, the delegate required them to repeat the procedure of 1944, requesting the partition as if by their own initiative. As a concession, Rome offered to entertain a petition for retention in the *nullius* of the adjacent townships of Belmont and Southpoint. The monks were also told that they could request rights in perpetuity to the parish of Saint Michael the Archangel in Gastonia. Whatever they decided, Vagnozzi instructed, the monks must act promptly.⁸⁴

When the chapter met on January 22, it voted to request a territory comprised only of the abbey's own property. This conformed to the Church's desire that the *cura animarum* be under the direction of consecrated bishops only. The monks declined to accept charge of Belmont,

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹*Ibid.*

⁸²Minutes of the Monastic Chapter, January 21, 1960, AAM; see also Tobin to Leo Frierson, Belmont Abbey, January 24, 1960, AAM, RG: A2.5.

⁸³Minutes of the Monastic Chapter, January 21, 1960, AAM.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*

Southpoint, or the parish of Saint Michael the Archangel. The only concession requested was that the rank of minor basilica be bestowed on the abbey cathedral.⁸⁵ Tobin wrote the delegate on January 30, providing a detailed explanation of the chapter's decisions.⁸⁶

That effectively settled the matter. When the administrator requested another interview with the delegate, for settling and securing the terms of the chapter's final petition, Vagnozzi assured him no additional meetings were necessary; decisions were already being made.⁸⁷ Even the Belmont Benedictines—who had consistently ignored the umbrage they inspired—could not ignore the tone of that response. Increasingly alert to the flavor of these negotiations, the monks even withdrew their petition on behalf of a basilica, saying they feared the embarrassment of its denial. To implore the necessary postulatory concessions seemed futile, perhaps prodigal at that point.⁸⁸

According to information Tobin furnished to the Holy See, the new territory of Belmont Abbey *Nullius* included one church (the abbey cathedral of Maryhelp), one semi-public oratory (the choir chapel in the monastery), only one family of seculars (consisting of a husband and wife, both non-Catholic), the religious of the abbey, and one hundred sixty boarding students (resident only during the school year).⁸⁹

Belatedly, the realization that the Sisters of Mercy would be lost to the *nullius* occasioned a petition for a change in the territory. The sisters appealed to remain in Belmont's 'diocese'; the primate interceded; the administrator and abbot-elect begged for this concession. In addition to the familial bonds that had come to connect the two orders, the Benedictines argued that the sisters' property consisted largely of land that proceeded from the monks' gift. But the request proved untimely and could not be considered. Rome had already drawn the boundaries.⁹⁰

On March 29, 1960, Coggin finally learned of his confirmation as abbot *nullius*.⁹¹ The announcement was made in Rome the following day. At the same time, the Holy See published its decision to restrict the *abbatia*

⁸⁵*Ibid.*

⁸⁶Tobin to Delegate, Belmont Abbey, January 30, 1960, AAM, RG: A2.5.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*; and Delegate to Tobin, Washington, D.C., February 2, 1960, AAM, RG: A2.5.

⁸⁸Tobin to Delegate, Belmont Abbey, March 4, 1960, AAM, RG: A2.5.

⁸⁹Tobin to Delegate, Belmont Abbey, March 7, 1960, AAM, RG: A2.5.

⁹⁰These letters are among Taylor, Coggin, Delegate, Primate, and Dunne, AAM, RG: A2.0 and A3.0.

⁹¹Delegate to Coggin, Washington, D.C., March 29, 1960, AAM, RG: A2.5.

nullius "intra septa monasterii."⁹² That resolved the matter of the 'diocese,' except that no one—either at the delegation or the abbey—knew what "intra septa monasterii" meant. Even the Consistorial was unable to provide a definition.⁹³ The delegation advised that "the exact meaning of this phrase would not be known until the complete document would arrive from the Holy See; and that in the meantime, it was thought, that [Belmont and Raleigh] should carry on as usual."⁹⁴ To Raleigh's consternation and Rome's annoyance, Belmont continued its appeal for the Mercy convent well into June.⁹⁵

Finally, the *nullius* was definitively restricted to the monks' property. On June 28 the ordinaries of Raleigh and Belmont, with Gerolamo Prigione as representative of the Holy See, formally transferred all but the 827 acres that housed the monks and their college to the Diocese of Raleigh.⁹⁶ Thus the *nullius* became more anomalous than ever.

The Smallest 'Diocese'

In 1960, Belmont Abbey administered a 'diocese' with no territory and no people. If the American hierarchy was confused previously by the separated territory, surely it was completely bewildered by this situation. In the United States, it was no 'honor' to have the smallest 'diocese' in the world or to single out a monk as the equal of bishops. Whenever possible, it seemed to the Benedictines, the episcopal conference, and even Rome, ignored Belmont.⁹⁷

Such slights did not weigh as heavily in 1960, however, because of the assumption at Belmont that the separated territory was finally secure. After all, it had nothing any other ordinary could desire. Indeed, ten years later, when Coggin retired, his successor, Edmund F. McCaffrey (1933–), was confirmed after a wait of only three weeks. Haid had waited over a

⁹²*Ibid.*

⁹³See Primate to Coggin, Rome, June 5, 1960; and Dunne to Coggin, Rome, May 9, 1960, AAM, RG: A3.0

⁹⁴Delegate to Coggin, Rome, April 1, 1960, AAM, RG: A2.5.

⁹⁵The last seems to be that of June 7, 1960, AAM.

⁹⁶A copy of the deed and statistical report are in AAM.

⁹⁷For example, in 1962, when ecclesiastical provinces were realigned by the creation of the Atlanta jurisdiction, the *nullius* was included in no province whatsoever. Even Rome did not note the omission. See Coggin to Paul Hallinan, Belmont Abbey, March 20 and 23, 1962, AAM, RG: 3.0. Much the same situation arose in 1925, when Michael Curley declined to invite Vincent Taylor to provincial meetings in Baltimore; the intervention of the delegate was required before the abbot won his seat.

year for the *nullius*; Taylor and Coggin awaited confirmation for four months. A new confidence and security seemed to attend the separated territory.

It appeared that those who argued in 1909–1910 that the *nullius* should be obtained as an honor rather than a jurisdiction had been affirmed. The Belmont *nullius* had indeed been recognized by the Church as primarily honorific.

Only thirty-seven years old when elected, McCaffrey became the youngest ordinary in the United States. With no active pastoral jurisdiction, he applied his vigorous voice and unbounded energy to a wider clientele. The abbot's doctorate in political science seemed particularly applicable to the public debates that stirred the American episcopate in the early 1970's.

In McCaffrey's reign, a new threat to the *nullius* arose. This time the Holy See questioned whether abbatial 'dioceses' should be eliminated universally. This context may or may not have been known to Abbot Edmund when, on July 10, 1974, he wrote Rome, asking to be relieved from the obligation for quinquennial visits *ad limina*. To win this exemption, he used the impolitic argument that the *nullius* in North Carolina was without moment, and could not reasonably be treated as a regular 'diocese.' The abbot characterized his see as "relatively small, and I am sure quite insignificant as far as the Holy See is concerned."⁹⁸ All too soon, Rome would be agreeing with that appraisal.

Soon after the abbot's letter, on October 1, 1974, the abbot primate warned that the Holy See was preparing to establish a new policy that would affect the status of *abbatiae nullius*.⁹⁹ Since no details were then available, McCaffrey, on October 30, implored Rembert Weakland, the Benedictine primate, to investigate the state of the question.¹⁰⁰ He learned, in response, that the eventual end of abbeys *nullius* was envisioned. Nevertheless, the primate theorized in a letter of December 11 that Belmont would not be "called into discussion" since the 1960 partition had already "clarified" its status and situation.¹⁰¹

Abbot Edmund also submitted an inquiry to the apostolic delegate, Archbishop Jean Jadot.¹⁰² The latter responded with a "conjecture" that "no new [*abbatiae nullius*] will be established, that new Abbots will not be

⁹⁸Edmund McCaffrey to Delegate, Belmont Abbey, July 10, 1974, AAM, RG: A4.0.

⁹⁹Primate to Martin Burne, Rome, October 1, 1974, ACF, RG: Martin Burne (1971–1983).

¹⁰⁰McCaffrey to Primate, Belmont Abbey, October 30, 1974, ASA, RG: Rembert Weakland (1967–1977).

¹⁰¹Primate to McCaffrey, Rome, December 11, 1974, ASA, RG: Weakland.

¹⁰²McCaffrey to Delegate, Belmont Abbey, October 29, 1974, AAM, RG: A4.0.

Bishops, and that the territory of existing Abbeys eventually will be changed to an ecclesiastical jurisdiction of another type."¹⁰³ But until this new policy was proclaimed, a review of the status of Belmont was unlikely unless occasioned by a change of ordinaries (as with the 1960 partition).

Three months later, on Good Friday, 1975, after only five years of service, Edmund McCaffrey advised Rome of his desire to abdicate the abbatial throne. The resignation was accepted, effective June 3. There was no delay whatsoever in the Holy See's issuance of a mandate for the monastic chapter to convene for the election of the fifth abbot *nullius* of Belmont.

The American bishops were also convoking a meeting, however. They had an agenda of their own.¹⁰⁴

Suppression

Dom Jude Cleary, O.S.B., was elected the fifth abbot *nullius* on July 22, 1975. The abbot-elect was a sober, Savannah-born monk, age fifty-one, especially respected for his monastic discipline and Benedictine integrity. He had been an administrator in the college through most of his twenty-five years at Belmont, holding a variety of offices including the presidency. Cleary had never been assigned away from the abbey, either to a priory or to a parish.

During his first month awaiting confirmation, Cleary had no reason to suspect trouble. Surely, it was reasoned, the Holy See intended to inflict no violence on the *nullius*; otherwise, the chapter would not have been instructed to elect an abbot *nullius*. Also, since the 'diocese' no longer possessed any territory, there was nothing to partition.

The apostolic delegate wrote Belmont on August 26, disturbing these unwarranted sentiments of security. Already, before the monks had acted on the instruction to elect a new ordinary, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, through its Committee on Diocesan Boundaries, had recommended a change in the status of the *nullius*. The committee's submission had been favorably received. "Now," Archbishop Jadot reported, "the Holy See would like to have your opinion on this matter." The Sacred Congregation for Bishops, in a letter dated August 12, had instructed the delegate to enter this inquiry.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³Delegate to McCaffrey, Rome, November 7, 1974, ASA, RG: Weakland.

¹⁰⁴Delegate to Jude Cleary, Washington, D.C., August 26, 1975, AAM, RG: DN5.0.

¹⁰⁵See Delegate to Burne, Washington, D.C., September 6, 1975, ACF, RG: Burne. The letter from the Sacred Congregation for Bishops to the Delegation in Washington is dated August 12, 1975.

In 1975, the Roman perspective on abbeys *nullius* was drawn, principally, from two themes: first, it stressed the propriety of an ordained bishop holding ecclesiastical authority over the faithful; second, dioceses were to exist for the care of the faithful, not as historical testimonies.

Cleary distributed the delegate's letter to several senior capitulars of Belmont, ones he described as "our most thoughtful and discerning monks," requesting comments.¹⁰⁶ His own sentiments were no secret. Even on the day of his abbatial election, he had admitted that he considered the *nullius* "anachronistic and even divisive in today's Church."¹⁰⁷ There seemed to be no need to press his opinion now, however, since the delegate's consultation impressed Cleary as no more than a "*pro forma* procedure" anyway.¹⁰⁸

The appraisals that Cleary received found the deletion of the *nullius* inevitable. More than the loss of a portion of Haid's patrimony, however, the respondents regretted the timing; the suppression would synchronize with the celebration of the monastery's centennial (1976). This coincidence, it was thought, created the impression that Rome's decision was a dishonoring of Belmont rather than a practical revision of diocesan boundaries.

Rome was sensitive to the matter of honor. The curial correspondents addressed it by recommending an unspecified compensatory honor, while Belmont's design suggested elimination of the problem itself, by preserving the *nullius* as it was. As in 1960, however, Rome was not prepared to concede the maintenance of the *status quo*.

The discussion concerning new honors for Belmont never moved forward, although a variety of possibilities was raised, mostly by the abbey. Might Belmont become an honorary *nullius*, for example? Could the abbots of Belmont be granted a titular abbatial see? Perhaps Maryhelp Cathedral could become a minor basilica. Could the abbot's name remain in the canon of the Mass? Could the abbot retain the right to episcopal colors in dress?¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶Cleary to Burne, Belmont Abbey, August 28, 1975, AAM, RG: A5.0. Comments were invited from Abbot Walter Coggin, Fathers Alcuin Baudermann, Anselm Biggs, Oscar Burnett, Jerome Dollard, Francis Forster, Kieran Neilson, John Oetgen, James Solari, Peter Stragand, and Brother Gregory Corcoran (all of whom are monks of Belmont), and from a secular priest of the *nullius*, John Bradley.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹See, for example, Cleary to Delegate, Belmont Abbey, September 2, 1975, AAM, RG: A5.0.

The abbot-elect raised these possibilities amid his "unhappy feeling that there is no way I can 'win.'" ¹¹⁰

On October 23, the apostolic delegate wrote Belmont. The Holy See had consented to confirm the election of Jude Cleary as fifth abbot *nullius* of Belmont. The public announcement in Rome was scheduled for Tuesday, November 4.¹¹¹ There would be no new honor for the abbey at this time, although the gift of a minor basilica remained open. The delegate stressed that news of the confirmation was to be held in secrecy, even from the monastic capitulars, pending Rome's official announcement.

The letter also reported that "the 'nullius' character of the Abbey has been suppressed '*nunc pro tunc*.'" After the celebration of the monastery's centennial, the separated territory would be incorporated into the Diocese of Charlotte. The official reason for the suppression was "that the present pastoral situation of the area no longer requires an independent jurisdiction in the form of an Abbey 'nullius,' though Belmont Abbey in its history rendered an important and much appreciated service."¹¹²

The delegate's letter reached Belmont on October 25. Three days later, Abbot Jude and the delegate spoke by telephone.¹¹³ The delay required in reaching the delegate seemed to foreshadow the decreased consequence of Belmont. When contact was finally made, Cleary asked that his confirmation be reconsidered. Would it not be more reasonable, he suggested, to be confirmed only as a simple abbot? Then the abbatial 'diocese' could be suppressed immediately, saving the new abbot from "going through the charade of seeming later to defend the *nullius*." To handle the reduction in territory in the ordinary manner (linking it to a change in superiors) would be less offensive to the monks than capping the centennial celebration with the suppression of the abbey's greatest honor.¹¹⁴

The delegate recommended against tampering with Cleary's confirmation. He also reminded the abbot again that even the capitulars were not to be advised of Rome's decisions until November 4.¹¹⁵ Jadot's only concession was the gift to Belmont of discretion in announcing the suppression. He suggested that it not be announced until after the centennial observance,

¹¹⁰Cleary to Burne, Belmont Abbey, September 5, 1975, ACF, RG: Burne.

¹¹¹Delegate to Cleary, Washington, D.C., October 23, 1975, AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹¹²*Ibid.*

¹¹³See Delegate to Cleary, Washington, D.C., October 28, 1975, AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹¹⁴Cleary's notes on telephone conversation with Delegate on October 28, 1975, regarding Delegate's letter of October 23, AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*

at which time suppression could be effected immediately.¹¹⁶ That way, it would not hover over the celebration, inhibiting joy.

On the evening of November 4 the Chapter met after Vespers. "Dead silence and sad, stony faces" received the announcement.¹¹⁷ Cleary became seriously concerned "that no vestige of formal recognition of this chapter in our history remains."¹¹⁸

Facing a New Role

On November 26, 1975, the monks of Belmont issued a press communiqué announcing the impending suppression of the *abbatia nullius dioecesis*.¹¹⁹ The statement reported that the Benedictines were honored by their new status. "This change," according to Cleary, "is a tribute to the zeal of the earlier monks." He continued, "it is the surest proof of their having successfully nurtured a fledgling Church to full maturity."¹²⁰

It was thought that the separated territory would quietly expire as the centennial year ended.¹²¹ That was not possible, however; for on October 23, 1976, Paul VI finally issued his long awaited *motu proprio*, "*De Abbatiarum Nullius Dioeceseos Innovatione*." Even though its text was not available until December 17, the document brought cathedral abbeys throughout the universal Church to public attention, and seemingly invited the American Catholic press to the door of Belmont Abbey. In the midst of this publicity, the apostolic delegate announced, on November 24, that a date had been selected for the suppression of Belmont Abbey's *nullius dioecesis*: Belmont's would be the first extinction of diocesan jurisdiction under the new Roman policy.

The *nullius* was suppressed on January 1, 1977. The Bishop of Charlotte,

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹¹⁷Cleary to Delegate and Cleary to Burne, Belmont Abbey, both November 12, 1975, AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹¹⁸Cleary's notes for meeting with capitulars of Belmont on evening of November 4, 1975, AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹¹⁹Press materials regarding suppression, November 26, 1975, AAM, RG: A5.0. Rumor of the dissolution of the 'diocese' was already circulating anyway. Dom Cuthbert Allen of the Belmont Chapter seems to have been the first person to divulge, albeit inadvertently, news of the change of status; immediately after the Chapter meeting on November 4, he was heard pondering whether the monks would have to mark the word "cathedral" off all the abbey's picture postcards. (Interview with J. R. Donoghue, July 28, 1990.)

¹²⁰Press materials regarding suppression, November 26, 1975, AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹²¹The 1976 centennial was celebrated with three rather subdued observances: A day of eucharistic adoration and communal thanksgiving on the anniversary of the arrival of the first monk (April 21), a public celebration on the feast of the titular (May 24), and a college commemoration on the feast of the patrons of the Cassinese Benedictines (October 2).

Michael Begley, sought with every possible effort, and with great success, to ease the change for the Benedictines.¹²² Cleary and Begley settled virtually all their concerns in a single meeting at the Charlotte chancery on December 14, 1976.¹²³ Begley offered his enthusiastic endorsement to the proposal of a minor basilica and offered the faculties of his office for promoting its cause.¹²⁴

Subsequently, all the approvals were won for the abbey cathedral to become a minor basilica. This involved the monks, local bishop, province, bishops' conference, apostolic delegate, and the authorities in Rome. All that remained was the final confirmation by Belmont of the features of the structure. The delegate wrote Cleary at least five times to urge the submission of these rather simple forms. The bishop of Charlotte also pushed for its completion. But Cleary wanted no more attention to be drawn to the abbey; moreover, he thought this a rather empty honor in light of the way matters had been handled. So the one honor Rome offered stood in abeyance. Abbot Jude placed a note in his basilica file: "This I've neglected—benignly. [signed]J."¹²⁵

The last abbot *nullius* of Belmont only abandoned his customary reserve after the separated territory was already lost. Unfortunately, his retort was phrased in so characteristically obscure a way that its point may have been lost: Cleary reported that this whole affair reflected "a culminating insensitivity to historical precedent and merit."¹²⁶

The termination of the *nullius* came in a *taxa* of \$750 for the documents of suppression. The abbot observed, "I find it a curious irony that we must pay so handsomely for what we are about to lose. However, life is filled with such curiosities."¹²⁷

The change took place completely without mark or incident. There was no compensatory honor, apparently no real dishonor, no disruption, no disparity to harm those who had lost their jurisdiction.¹²⁸

¹²²See Cleary to Michael Begley, Belmont Abbey, May 26, 1976; Begley to Cleary, Charlotte, North Carolina, November 30, 1976; Begley to Delegate, Charlotte, December 21, 1976; and Cleary to Delegate, Belmont Abbey, February 11, 1977, AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹²³Notation in Cleary's suppression file, AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹²⁴Begley to Cleary, Charlotte, November 30, 1976, AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹²⁵Note, signed as indicated, undated (Spring, 1978), AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹²⁶Cleary to Delegate, Belmont Abbey, January 5, 1977, AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹²⁷Cleary to Burne, Belmont Abbey, January 2, 1976, AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹²⁸For most of the people involved, the greatest difficulty seemed to come in learning not to call the monks' church the "abbey cathedral." For some, that remains difficult still. Even Bishop Michael Begley is among those who struggle with the revised designation of the church. [Noted in conversation with Begley, May 6, 1990.]

A Unique *Nullius*

Repeatedly since the *nullius* was introduced into North Carolina, the Holy See pondered the separated territory's role and benefit, if any, in securing not just parochial advantages but monastic values. Remarkably, each time Rome noted that the Belmont 'diocese' was failing in evangelization, it issued no call to send more men into the parishes; instead, the Holy See always called for a recommitment to the cloister and schools. In that extraordinary reversal of diocesan expectations, we may find the uniqueness of what was asked of this abbatial see.

In 1924, when the Benedictines lost administration over the entire state, Rome noted the abbey's inability to fan out over so extensive an area while staffing monasteries and schools in Carolina, northern Virginia, Richmond, and Savannah, plus parishes in the 1891 territory, and *nullius*. The parish expectations were eased so that the monastic life might continue unabated.¹²⁹

In 1941, with Raleigh's annexation of the territory of 1891, the Holy See again advised Belmont to favor its schools and monasteries over its parishes. Of course, that evaluation also noted that the Belmont Benedictines seemed hopelessly unsuccessful as missionaries.¹³⁰ The faith was not growing in their territory, while their schools and monasteries were worth continued nurturing. Rome made choices here that should be studied. They are unusual choices to which the Holy See would adhere in future admonitions.

In the 1944 partition, Rome was even more explicit: the Benedictines were advised to return to their monastic origins and to accept the school rather than parochial work as their chief apostolic endeavor: "While your abbey has been successful in scholastic projects, it is inevitable that the missionary phase of the priests' life has to be foregone [*sic*]. Indeed, it does not seem possible for the abbey to work the territory as it should be worked."¹³¹ This was a serious rebuke, a strong correction. Unfortunately, this call to amendment was largely overlooked.

¹²⁹Curley's correspondence with Delegate and Dennen (AAB) documents the thrust of the negotiations. See also Gabriel Locher to Willibald Baumgartner, Rome, November 7, 1924, AAM, RG: B22.

¹³⁰Sacred Consistorial Congregation to Taylor, Vatican, June 24, 1935, AAM, RG: A2.0. It must be noted that the shift to diocesan priests was not a panacea. Improved statistics were not particularly disproportionate to previous growth. Substantial Catholic progress for these counties awaited the creation of the Diocese of Charlotte in 1971/72. The assignment of resident pastors by McGuinness did, however, improve and lend convenience to Catholic affairs.

¹³¹Delegate to Taylor, Washington, D.C., October 23, 1943, AAM, RG: A2.0.

In 1960, once again, the abbey was reminded of how the Holy See desired the monks to apply themselves to the cloister and college, not to parochial ministry. By this partition, it was intended that the monks, "freed from external duty of whatever other sort, . . . may devote their entire efforts to the education and formation of youth."¹³²

Finally, the *instructio* of 1976 advised the monks to find their apostolic expression in educational work, saying the school should strive to transmit its message "according to the spirit and memory of Saint Benedict"; moreover, the monks should propose that message "by [a] living example, [and] because of fidelity to Christian truth in the principles maintained by each [monk] and by the [monastic] community." This, the *instructio* contended, "seem[s] to be the most excellent of all the treasures which the Belmont community will hand on to the new generations of North Carolina."¹³³

Abbot Jude concurred. He wrote the delegate, "I believe that [the suppression of the *nullius*] can only lead to clarity about the peculiar genius of monastic life and allow us in the years ahead to make an even more significant contribution to the life of the Church in our area than that uncommonly worthwhile one of the last century."¹³⁴

What other 'diocese' has received such a call as this, a call to abandon its parishes, to take a college as its "pastoral work,"¹³⁵ and to intensify the commitment of its monks? That mission is the wonderfully peculiar aspect of the Cathedral Abbey in the United States. Instead of a grand commitment to parishes and diocesan institutions, it was asked to invigorate a new and more fervent monastic life. If it succeeded, it realized the unusual dream and methodology of Leo Haid in 1910.¹³⁶ Perhaps it also touched on the singular genius of Saint Benedict.

¹³²Decree of Sacred Consistorial Congregation, March 26, 1960, AAM, RG: E10.

¹³³Sacred Congregation for Bishops to Cleary, Vatican, January 31, 1976, AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹³⁴Cleary to Delegate, Belmont Abbey, November 30, 1976, AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹³⁵Sacred Congregation for Bishops to Cleary, Vatican, January 31, 1976, AAM, RG: A5.0.

¹³⁶"It will be our sincere effort so to [see] that our Abbey may not prove undeserving [of the *nullius*], as far as we can make it a model Home [*sic*] for Benedictines in America." Haid to Primate, Belmont Abbey, May 12, 1910, ASA, RG: De Hemptinne.

