CHAPTER TWO

THE FOUNDLING UNIVERSITY

Reflections on the Early History of DePaul

"Make No Small Plans"

Dennis P. McCann

Rushing to and from classes, and all the other busyness that keeps DePaul University bustling from day to day, one still has the opportunity to stop by a courtyard just off the main corridor in Schmitt Academic Center (SAC) where a statue of Saint Vincent dePaul holding an infant invites us to prayer or, perhaps, to a recollection of the university's distinctive history and sense of mission. The statue is iconic, very traditional, and paternalistic. It was meant to memorialize the pre-Vatican II Church's official designation of Saint Vincent as preeminently "the apostle of charity," and it does so by recalling the work that he helped St. Louise deMarillac organize in protecting the orphans and other homeless children of Paris. Saint Vincent is holding the infant in a manner reminiscent of statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary or her chaste spouse, Saint Joseph, holding Baby Jesus who is also Christ the Light of the World.

The statue delicately suggests what liberation theology was later to make explicit, namely, that the poor are, in the eyes of faith, the very presence of Christ among us. Yet the reality of poverty and what it does to the poor remains veiled, for the infant also symbolizes an innocence that absolves us as soon as we respond—as Saint Vincent is depicted—with a simple, intensely personal gesture of protection. The cry of the poor, as symbolized by the infant, is not yet an occasion for political mobilization or Christian social action. This Saint Vincent invites us to perform a personal act of charity, directed to the foundling's immediate need for warmth, shelter and hospitality. The mood is still one of compassion and not yet reciprocity, of love, and not yet justice.

The many layered meanings conveyed in Saint Vincent's paternal embrace of the foundling can be inferred by contrasting it with the most recent Saint Vincent memorial to grace the Lincoln Park campus, a bronze arrangement of Saint Vincent with several DePaul students, in yet another courtyard, this one the sunny garden placed between SAC and the new Father John T. Richardson Library. There's nothing traditional about this Saint Vincent, except possi-
bly his cassock. For he is seated and clearly involved in a conversation in which students speak as well as listen. The pose suggests that he is intellectually engaged by them, a veteran teacher who still can learn something new from each new group of students. The students are diverse in gender and ethnicity, just as the university hopes to be. They are casually posed, too grownup to ever again be held in Saint Vincent’s arms. They don’t need protection, but they do seek an education whose aims ultimately they will decide for themselves.

Both statues are idealized and romantic. They conceal DePaul’s reality as much as they reveal it. Nevertheless, the contrasting aspirations they depict may offer clues to the history of DePaul University’s unique claims to a Catholic identity and an authentically Vincentian sense of mission. In what follows, I focus on the founding of DePaul University, and thus will tend to emphasize the meanings conveyed in the traditional statue of Saint Vincent. But since these reflections are meant to contribute to the relevant aspects of the university’s search for a usable past, they cannot help but reflect my experience in a DePaul that is closer, in fact, to the aspirations conveyed in the bronze ensemble of Saint Vincent and today’s students.

The title for this chapter is meant to be a pun. Instead of “the founding of the university” I call this “the foundling university.” For my research into DePaul’s early history suggests that the origin and development of DePaul University is not the result of some grand design, or some allegedly Vincentian genius for, of all things, strategic planning. Rather DePaul University is, as it was from very early on, the foundling in Saint Vincent’s arms, a child abandoned by its own father, the archbishop of Chicago. This foundling survived thanks largely to the somewhat unorthodox nurturing it received from surrogate fathers, the priests of the Congregation of the Mission who labored here in the first decades of the 20th century. I hope to show that the early history of DePaul was unusually traumatic, and the effects of that trauma continue to shape the university’s sense of identity, or its lack of identity, in often imperceptible ways. Though this foundling university grew up a street-wise kid from Chicago, one hopes that even as she learns to accept her roots, she will never forget them.

**The Founding of a University**

The facts upon which I wish to build this revisionist view of the university’s early history are generally familiar and largely undisputed. Let me summarize them as they are recounted in Stafford Poole’s authoritative essay, “The Educational Apostolate: Colleges, Universities, and Secondary Schools.” (1) Poole observes that the hope of establishing some sort of college for “daystudents,” the sons of Chicago’s burgeoning Catholic immigrant population, was already part of the founding mission of Saint Vincent dePaul Church in 1876. This hope was not to be realized until Patrick Feehan, archbishop of Chicago (1880–1902), authorized the Vincentian priests to establish Saint Vincent’s College in 1898, an institution that would educate both laymen and candidates preparing for the Roman Catholic priesthood in the Chicago archdiocese.
The Vincentians accepted this edict with the understanding that Saint Vincent's College would be the Catholic institution of higher learning for the rapidly developing north side of Chicago, an arrangement paralleling the role that Saint Ignatius College had filled for Chicago's west side Catholics since 1870. The provincial, Thomas Smith, C.M., levied a substantial tax on the 14 existing Vincentian institutions of the Western province to pay for the college's first buildings, and on June 30, 1898, a charter to operate a college was granted by the State of Illinois. Saint Vincent's College first opened its doors on September 5, 1898, the date the university centennial celebrates. The first college staff consisted of Thomas Finney, C.M., and six scholastics, that is, six seminarians from the province's motherhouse, Saint Mary of the Barrens, Perryville, Missouri, who were in the final stages of their priestly training. Fr. Smith himself acted as supervisor until January 1899, when he appointed Peter Vincent Byrne, C.M., as the college's first president. Fr. Byrne became the central Vincentian figure in the early history of DePaul University.

The college's first years of operation were encouraging, and the new president, following Father Smith's lead, began an ambitious program of expansion. In quick succession, Father Byrne broke ground for a new administration building and expanded the curriculum by adding departments of mechanical, electrical, and civil engineering. In 1907 he authorized construction of the auditorium. The architecturally avant garde design had near-disastrous consequences. It made poor economic sense and generated intense controversy within the Vincentian community and other ecclesiastical circles. 1907 was the year when Saint Vincent's College secured a revision in its charter, reopening in September as DePaul University. Under the banner of its new identity, Byrne continued to innovate, first, by appointing five laypersons to the board of trustees, an unprecedented move at the time among American Catholic colleges and universities, and second, by introducing the elective system into the curriculum, in order to bring DePaul into what Byrne regarded as the mainstream of American higher education. Finally, the college erected four new buildings and hired additional faculty at high salaries. By 1908, the university had amassed a debt of over half a million dollars as a result of Byrne's policies. As other authors in this volume note, this extraordinary sum was not paid off until the 1940s.

To prove that he was serious about the leadership role in American higher education that he envisioned for DePaul, Byrne allowed the study of religion to be marginalized by refusing to exempt course offerings in religion from the logic of the elective system. Religion courses at DePaul became, in Poole's words, "an extracurricular affair." Furthermore, the university's new charter explicitly pledged that an applicant's religious affiliation, or lack thereof, would have no bearing on admission to DePaul. These moves made Byrne's leadership even more controversial, and when the financial panic of 1907 shrank both DePaul's enrollment and its reputation among its creditors, Byrne was criticized as a "poor administrator." He was forced to resign in May, 1909. The foundling university now found itself bankrupt.

Byrne was succeeded in the presidency by John Martin, C.M., whom the provincial—the
The Rev. Peter V. Byrne, C.M., President 1899-1909.

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same Father Finney who had been part of Saint Vincent's original teaching staff—placed under tight restrictions regarding university finances. The provincial also tried to restore DePaul's credit rating by securing a short-term loan of $100,000 from a bank in Saint Louis. Father Martin may have felt that, with the university's creditors satisfied for the time being, he was free to ignore the provincial's interdiction against further borrowing. When Finney found out about a $25,000 loan arranged by Martin with a Chicago bank, the new president was removed. In September 1910, Francis X. McCabe, C.M., replaced him. Father McCabe managed to procure the resources to continue Byrne's policy of expansion and academic innovation, illustrated by the establishment of the university's schools of music, commerce, and law. He oversaw the creation of the "Loop campus" in 1913 to house the commerce and law programs, and introduced coeducation in 1911 with summer schools for Catholic women who sought accreditation as teachers. Though DePaul suffered the normal loss of students to the military as the country mobilized for World War I, by the end of McCabe's tenure in 1920, DePaul, like the rest of the country, was poised for a period of consolidation and solid growth, if not prosperity.

Peter Vincent Byrne and Vincentian Higher Education

This account so far may suggest that the foundling university is better characterized as a runaway than as a child abandoned by its father. Though the condensed chronology presented here may make Byrne seem like a visionary—albeit a remarkably willful one whose obsession with growth nearly precluded any future at all for the university—it wasn't just blind ambition that drove him to desperate measures. Saint Vincent's College was essentially doomed by the actions of Feehan's successor, the new archbishop of Chicago, James Quigley (1903–1915). Archbishop Quigley had been trained by the Vincentians and, as former bishop of Buffalo, New York, he had served ex-officio as chancellor of another Vincentian institution, Niagara University. Despite—or, perhaps, because of—his personal familiarity with the Vincentians, Quigley in effect revoked the ecclesiastical mission of Saint Vincent's College, by establishing his own archdiocesan preparatory seminary in 1905, the Cathedral College that later was to bear his name. This meant that the Archdiocese of Chicago would no longer send its seminar-
ians to study at Saint Vincent's. The other half of the college's dual mission, its mandate to educate Catholic laymen, was also severely undermined by Quigley's decision in 1906 to permit the Jesuits to move Saint Ignatius College from Chicago's west side to the north side. Despite protests from Father Finney, the archbishop felt no obligation to honor his predecessor's promises. Unless some alternative could be found, Saint Vincent's would have to compete with Saint Ignatius for students and tuition fees, a rivalry that did not bode well for the future of either institution.

Whatever Quigley's motives may have been, Byrne was not about to let the college die. His move to recharter the institution as DePaul University salvaged from the archdiocese's apparent indifference to Saint Vincent's an unusual opportunity for educational innovation. That opportunity, I believe, can only be fully appreciated by understanding Byrne's actions in the context of an impasse that had dogged Vincentian educational institutions throughout their history in the United States.

Before accepting the presidency of Saint Vincent's College in Chicago, Byrne had served brief terms as president of Saint Vincent's College in Cape Girardeau, Missouri (1886-1889) (2) and as rector of Kenrick Seminary in Saint Louis (1894–1897). (3) The histories of these two institutions were intimately interrelated, a fact that bears testimony to the pre-Vatican II paradox that confronted Catholicism's desire to educate its seminarians in first-rate academic institutions that excluded laymen and laywomen. This goal was virtually impossible, given the economics of privately financed higher education at the time. Consequently, a "mixed" college that educated laymen along with candidates for the priesthood often resulted when the Vincentians sought to found a seminary in the Western Province of the United States.

The history of both the Vincentian motherhouse, Saint Mary of the Barrens, and Saint Vincent's College at the Cape confirm the old saw, "He who pays the piper calls the tune." Local benefactors who controlled the resources on which Vincentian institutions depended usually were not interested in endowing a seminary. But they were very eager to secure the
services of seminarians and priest-teachers in a college that would educate their sons and the other young men of the region. The Vincentian pattern, in the western province at least, seems to have been one of circumventing its benefactors' preferences where possible, and acquiescing to them when necessary. In short, they often combined institutional missions to make ends meet. Throughout the 19th century, both Saint Mary of the Barrens and Saint Vincent's at the Cape reflected the tensions and institutional instability that apparently resulted from trying to accommodate both the benefactors who wanted a secular college and the bishops—as well as the Congregation of the Mission's own superiors—who every now and then demanded that the Church's ideal of seminary education be rigorously pursued.

When Byrne was appointed president of Saint Vincent's at the Cape, he inherited an institution that for nearly 50 years had attempted, with some success, to serve both masters. Since its founding in 1843, Saint Vincent's had been mostly a "mixed" institution, with certain brief periods when it functioned exclusively as either a secular college or a seminary. (4) Examining the college's archive at Saint Mary of the Barrens, one finds no evidence that foreshadows Byrne's allegedly visionary leadership at DePaul University. Instead, what appears is a generous, open-hearted attempt to make the inherited system work and improve it incrementally. This effort was played against the background of episcopal decisions that would eventuate in the creation of Kenrick Seminary and the consequent withdrawal of the seminarians to Saint Louis. The founding of Kenrick in 1900 doomed Saint Vincent's College at the Cape, for it was unable to survive by serving only lay college students. Byrne's presidency had come and gone roughly a decade before Kenrick was opened, but the archives suggest that he could easily read the handwriting on the wall.

Byrne's own approach to the college's uncertain future seems to have been to emphasize its strengths as a mixed institution. The Saint Vincent College catalogue issued in Byrne's last year in office (1888-89) spells out an educational mission in which the curriculum is divided into three different tracks, "The Ecclesiastical, the Collegiate, and the Commercial." (5) The only change evident in the catalogues issued during Byrne's administration are the graphics. The Byrne catalogues feature impressive pictures of the college's laboratories for chemistry and physics. The mission statement, with its reassurances about the "unremitting care and vigilance" directed toward the morality of students and its outline of the three tracks, is unchanged. Byrne may have already imagined a radically different future for American higher education, but there is no hint of a visionary program at Saint Vincent's at the Cape. Particularly instructive is the absence of the elective system he was to introduce at DePaul University, with its laissez-faire implications for the role of religious instruction in the curriculum.

Judging from the college's daybooks (6) in which the student prefect was expected to keep a journal recording the high points of the academic year, Byrne was enormously popular among the students. He played the paternal role expected of him very well, as chief presider over the college's religious and secular rituals, and the dispenser of the chief boon—unex-
pected days off from classes—that were so cherished by boarding students in those days. At the same time, the daybooks reveal why the mixed system was essentially unworkable. The student prefects, all of whom were seminarians, unfailingly recorded their irritation with the boisterous and sometimes troubled behavior of the lay students. Alcoholism, then as now, was a major problem for college students. With an understandably exalted sense of their own dignity as candidates for the priesthood, the student prefects complained that the president was not rigorous enough in enforcing the rules, expelling trouble-makers, and otherwise disciplining the lay student population to the satisfaction of the seminarians. It is not surprising that such complaints occasionally found their way back to the bishops, who saw in them justification for abandoning the mixed system and establishing stand-alone seminaries. The student prefects, of course, represented only half the story.

The rest is revealed in what little correspondence survives from the Bryne administration. Presidents in mixed institutions such as Saint Vincent's at the Cape had little choice other than to turn a blind eye to all but the most flagrant violations of proper decorum. Byrne's correspondence is littered with letters from all-too-busy parents, the professional elite of the Mississippi valley, who were bent on using the college as a convenient reformatory—handy precisely because it was a boarding school—for their wayward children. Byrne could hardly expect to win the hearts (or open the pocketbooks) of his lay benefactors if he expelled their sons from school! One imagines Byrne using his considerable charm to keep the tensions from spilling over into major scandal. For the mixed institution to succeed, he had to spend considerable energy from day to day searching for a *modus vivendi* for both seminarians and lay students. It must have been a thankless task, if ever there was one.

The archives provide no direct evidence that would explain why Byrne's presidency ended in the summer of 1889. The catalogue for the following year merely notes the name of his successor, Francis Nugent, C.M., and the minutes of the board of trustees make no remarks at all on the change in administration. The daybook, however, does provide a basis for fruitful speculation. In the months preceding Byrne's departure, there is no hint that his term in office is about to expire. There are no preparations for farewell receptions or other signs that would accompany an expected and orderly leave-taking. It does, however, yield indications of Byrne's heightened participation in Cape Girardeau's civic affairs, and tantalizing references to campus visitations by representatives of the "normal school" or teachers' college in the area. If Byrne were attempting to open the college still further to lay students and the educational needs of the local civic community, his actions would certainly have made it more difficult for the provincial to convince bishops to keep sending seminarians there. Perhaps Byrne already understood that the mixed system was untenable and was hoping to steer Saint Vincent's onto a more straightforwardly secular path of development.

Whatever the reasons for Byrne's departure from Saint Vincent's at the Cape, he was soon to play a crucial role in the founding of Kenrick Seminary in Saint Louis. The intricate maneu-
vering that led to Archbishop Kenrick's decision to entrust its founding to the Vincentians is not part of this story. Suffice it to say that once the contract was signed that formally authorized the Vincentian initiative in 1892, Byrne, along with his successor at Saint Vincent's at the Cape, Father Nugent, was appointed to raise funds for the seminary buildings. In that capacity, Byrne and Nugent goaded the Provincial, Thomas J. Smith, C.M., to take special measures to insure the educational effectiveness of Kenrick's curriculum. Byrne understood that simply protecting seminarians from the contamination of lay students was no guarantee of academic quality. Byrne's complaints, which often went over Father Smith's head to higher authorities in the Congregation of the Mission, eventually led to his appointment as seminary rector in December 1894, a post that he held until Smith replaced him with Nugent in 1897. Stafford Poole's account of Byrne's rectorship at Kenrick, from which these facts are taken, (8) does not explain the reasons for either Byrne's appointment or his later dismissal. Much as Byrne may have irritated the provincial by acting on his own at both the college and the seminary, their differences did not keep Smith from later naming Byrne president of Saint Vincent's College in Chicago.

Sister Margaret Beudette, S.C., poses with cast bronze sculptures she created of St. Vincent dePaul and two contemporary students. The sculptures are part of St. Vincent's Circle, a landscaped plaza on the university's Lincoln Park campus donated by Board of Trustees Chairman Richard A. Heise and dedicated to the students of DePaul. (1995)
What can this examination of Byrne's previous forays into academic administration tell us about his role in transforming Saint Vincent's College into DePaul University? When Byrne assumed the presidency of Saint Vincent's in Chicago in January 1899 he possessed, or at least had the opportunity to benefit from, the wisdom of hindsight. The college in Chicago was ostensibly founded with the same dual mission that Byrne had faithfully attempted to carry out at Saint Vincent's at the Cape. Byrne knew that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to execute that same mission in Chicago while striving for academic excellence above all. Therefore, when Archbishop Quigley unilaterally rescinded Saint Vincent's ecclesiastical mission, Byrne was well prepared to focus the college as an institution on its other charge: to serve the educational needs of Chicago's Catholic lay students. When Quigley later authorized Saint Ignatius' move to the north side of Chicago, Byrne knew that the only path still open to Saint Vincent's involved deliberately transforming itself into something that Saint Ignatius emphatically was not, namely, a university.

It is at this point that Byrne's distinctive educational vision and the way he tried to implement it at DePaul becomes relevant; but before examining that vision, it would be useful to recall the name that Byrne originally proposed for the new university. Saint Vincent's was to reopen as the University of North Chicago, a title that Byrne hoped would emphasize its aspiration to serve all the people of Chicago regardless of their religious affiliation, and also to strive for academic excellence to rival the achievement of a certain other university recently established on the south side of the city. Byrne's proposal was rejected by the provincial, Father Finney, who felt that something more Catholic was needed in the name. It was Justin Nuelle, C.M., the college's prefect of studies, who suggested DePaul University, and so it has been known ever since. (9)

Byrne's Vision and the Character of DePaul
Lester F. Goodchild succinctly captured the nature of Byrne's educational vision when he observed that “Byrne defined the Catholic character of the university as a university conducted under Catholic auspices.” (10) Goodchild's account of Byrne's policies proves essentially accurate when it is considered in light of surviving material in the university archives, especially the eyewitness accounts of Daniel McHugh, C.M. (11) Goodchild, however, also attempts to situate Byrne's policies within the so-called Americanist heresy condemned in 1899 by Pope Leo XIII. This interpretation does not appear to be warranted by the facts. (12) Byrne was essentially a pragmatist, an educational innovator blessed with an entrepreneurial spirit. The exigencies of marketing another Catholic university on the north side of Chicago and finding it a niche different from the one Archbishop Quigley had secured for the Jesuits of Saint Ignatius College are, in my view, sufficient to account for Byrne's innovations.

Any doubts that pragmatism can lead to radical innovation are dispelled by considering carefully what Byrne had in mind when he chartered a Chicago university under Catholic
The Articles of Incorporation themselves are modeled on those of the University of Chicago and set a strikingly secular tone for DePaul University. They commit the university, among other things, “to provide, impart and furnish opportunities for all departments of higher education to persons of both sexes on equal terms.” There was no precedent whatsoever for coeducation in American Catholic higher education at the time, yet this promise was to become a reality at DePaul only four years later, in 1911. The composition of the board of trustees was equally innovative, consisting as it did of ten Vincentian priests and five laypersons. This arrangement tended to ensure not only the transparency of the board's deliberations, but also the university's faithfulness to DePaul's charter long after Byrne's term of office had ended. What made DePaul something truly different from other Catholic institutions that called themselves universities, however, was Byrne's commitment to curricular reform which, in turn, reflected and further intensified the decentralizing of religious development, particularly instruction in Catholic faith and morals, in the academic program.

The rationale for Byrne's modified elective system was laid out in fulsome detail in Father Nuelle's "Report of the Director of Studies to the President" (February 1, 1909) which Father McHugh preserved substantially verbatim. Nuelle first made it clear that the changes had Byrne's "hearty sanction and cooperation." His report took the form of a reflection on educational philosophy, contrasting "the old college and its advantages" with "the new system that prevailed in the larger universities," in order finally to advocate, predictably, a policy of moderation, "In Medio Virtus Stat." Given the rather authoritarian tenor of traditional Catholic education at the time, the document as a whole is remarkably student oriented. The major advantage of the elective system was that by encouraging students to choose courses consistent with their personal interests and professional goals, student motivation for scholastic achievement would be increased. At the same time, each student would work with a faculty advisor who would help him or her make the best curricular choices. Student advising was envisioned as the most important internal accountability structure, but the electives program remained a "modified" or limited system precisely because elective studies were not available to the student until after the two-year curriculum of "prescribed studies" had been successfully completed. Philosophy, Latin, Greek, English, and mathematics made up the group of prescribed studies. Philosophy, in particular, was reaffirmed as the core of the university's commitment to providing a liberal education.

Summarizing the arguments favoring Byrne's modified elective system, Nuelle pointed out that elective courses made up only "about one-half of the time to be spent in college work," hence, the system was simply an analogous application of the educational requirements that the Church expected of candidates for the priesthood. After requiring six years (four in high school and two in college) of prescribed studies considered essential to a liberal education, the theological seminaries then offered just one specialized set of "electives." In this way, they provided required courses in ecclesiastical studies that insured the appropriate qualifications
for the Catholic priesthood. A modified elective system, by implication, merely universalized
this ideal by offering a range of options to prepare students for the full spectrum of modern
professions. This argument—no doubt, an ingenious one to make to the provincial—was a
telling indication that Byrne was thinking about the elective system in terms of the modern
student's need for professional training.

Nuelle's remarks on the pivotal role of philosophy in the prescribed part of the under-
graduate program further demonstrated Byrne's essentially Catholic understanding of the
modified elective system. Philosophy courses, in Nuelle's calculation, constituted "about one-
eighth of the DePaul student's time spent in college." (15) More important than the number
of courses was their subject matter. Nuelle described what was essentially the standard cur-
riculum in neo-Scholastic philosophy prescribed by the Church for the college education of
seminarians. He observed that there were advantages in studying these subjects from Latin
textbooks, for philosophizing in Latin "results in closer scrutiny, a more just weighing of words
and, therefore, a deeper comprehension." Lest there be any doubts about DePaul's commit­
tment to the Church's canonical view of neo-Scholastic philosophy, he added that "the prescribed
philosophy should be the philosophy of common sense, not a grindstone of abstractions, possibles,
etc., well calculated to evolve a narrow psychologue, or subjectivist—but there is little danger here."
(16) The subjectivist possibility, of course, was precisely the can of worms that neo-Scholastic
manuals warned was the logical outcome of modern post-Cartesian philosophy. In Nuelle's
view, there was "little danger here," of rampant subjectivism, which supported the assump­
tions that not only would the Vincentian priests themselves continue to teach philosophy but
also that the streetwise sons of Chicago's immigrant communities whom DePaul hoped to attract
would be unlikely to be taken in by effete and useless speculation.

What Nuelle, and by implication, Byrne had to say about philosophy is entirely consis­
tent with the official status given to the philosophical study of Saint Thomas Aquinas' work,
mandated in Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, Aetemi Patris (1879). Thomism, in short, was regarded
as the philosophical articulation of "common sense," as anyone could easily discover simply
by studying it thoroughly with an open mind. Such a program of philosophical study formed
the backbone of DePaul's undergraduate program and the core of its claim to a Catholic iden­
tity. Thomism's intellectual strength—as perceived by the Vincentians and all other American
Catholic educators at the time—accounts for Byrne's self-confident embrace of academic ex­
cellence and his relative indifference to the academic study of religion. Religious instruction
was necessary for the proper practice of the faith; it was meant to provide neither a world­
view nor the intellectual weaponry for defending one's faith with compelling arguments. Since
only philosophy—namely the true philosophia perennis codified in Thomistic Scholasticism—
provided that defense, only philosophy was to be part of the prescribed curriculum. Catholic
religious instruction, like opportunities for Catholic devotions, mass and the sacraments, could
safely be regarded as extracurricular. It was required of all students who elected to identify
themselves as Catholics, but such religious instruction was simply not central to the Catholic identity of DePaul University, at least as Byrne and Nuelle conceived it.

**Byrne's Gamble for Greatness**

The most definitive statement of Byrne's educational vision is contained in his "First Annual Report to the Trustees of DePaul University, 1908–1909," (17) which was issued just three months before he resigned from the presidency. This document confirmed Byrne's ambitions for DePaul, which he hoped would achieve a prominence equal to Northwestern University and the University of Chicago; it suggests further that the motive for the university's rapid expansion was market driven. He portrayed rapid enrollment growth as the key to institutional development. The report also made the case that DePaul University was primarily an urban institution serving the needs of all of Chicago's citizens. The trustees were reminded of the university's charter and its promise that "no religious test is applied to either students or teachers." But DePaul's openness to religious and cultural diversity did not stem from any philosophical considerations about the nature of human liberty, any more than did Byrne's decision to implement a modified elective system. The report suggested that both were a result of a pragmatic calculation that, without such policies, enrollments simply would not grow as fast as they must if DePaul were to become a university in fact as well as in aspiration.

Byrne's pragmatism was particularly evident in his strategy for tapping the financial power of Chicago's civic elite. He believed it was in their collective self-interest to support DePaul precisely because the university was poised to play a unique role in main streaming or pacifying Chicago's immigrant communities. Byrne, like many other American Catholic leaders at the time, touted "the conservatism of Catholic teaching, especially in matters of political, moral and social import," implying that the university might be Chicago's most effective weapon against social anarchy. This was designed to reassure the civic elite that though DePaul intended to be a genuinely open university, its Catholic students—who would no doubt continue to remain in the majority for some time to come—would receive wholesome instruction in a form of social Christianity that was officially anti-Marxist, anti-socialist, and keenly sensitive to the potential excesses of popular democracy.
Byrne's "First Report" was also significant for what it did not say about the problems that were, it seems, about to end his presidency. The half million dollar debt was acknowledged in the course of an exhortation to the trustees to find new ways to discharge it. But there was no hint of the extent to which the university's debt was a direct result of Byrne's ill-fated decision to build the College Theater (or auditorium, as it was also called). The largest single document in McHugh's "Notes" was an eighteen page narrative outlining the story of the auditorium and its near disastrous effect on the university's finances. (18) McHugh, who as university treasurer had immediate access to the accounts, estimated the cost of building the theater at over $100,000. He also emphasized the need for such a building and its central position in Byrne's vision of DePaul as a university that integrated the best of both liberal and professional education.

The theater was intended to symbolize the university's commitment to excellence in music and drama, "part of the cultural heritage of man," as well as debating and oratory, "powerful tools in law, politics and other fields of human endeavor.” An architecturally significant building with a seating capacity of 1,500, the auditorium was regarded as one of the largest and most beautiful theaters in Chicago. It also proved to be Byrne's undoing. What went wrong?

According to McHugh's recollections, Byrne felt that he could easily pay off the debt on the building from the revenues that a full schedule of events at the theater would bring in. He knew that the Bush Temple Theater, where Saint Vincent's College had held its commencements, cleared over $30,000 a year. But the Bush Temple stood at the corner of Chicago Avenue and Clark Street; the auditorium, by contrast, was somewhat out of place in a quiet residential neighborhood still considered off the beaten path, at least for theater goers. As McHugh ruefully observed...
in hindsight, “Over at Lincoln Avenue and Fullerton, there might have been a chance, at least for a while.” The revenues generated fell ludicrously short of Byrne’s expectations, and the university’s inability to service the debt on the new building was further exacerbated by the economic downturn of 1907 which, predictably, caused DePaul’s credit to evaporate.

The auditorium also compounded Byrne’s difficulties with the Vincentians. He and the university were already called to answer for the absence of religious instruction in the new curriculum. When Finney, the provincial, made his canonical visitation in 1908, he characterized the situation as “rather deplorable,” citing the lack of a “system of discipline” and the neglect of “religious training of the boys,” which he considered “no slight deficiency in a Catholic college.” (19) Interestingly enough, Finney apparently attributed these failings to Byrne’s preoccupation with finances and institutional development and did not view them as the predictable consequence of Byrne’s innovative academic policies. Indeed, Finney did not seem to appreciate the significance of rechartering the college as DePaul University, even though—or possibly because—he had served as the first Vincentian priest on the faculty of Saint Vincent’s College. His report to the Vincentian Superior General, Antoine Fiat, C.M., minimized the significance of the name change, as if it were merely an accommodation to local custom. (20) Obviously, the change was intended to be far-reaching and the new institution’s program would, in fact, constitute a groundbreaking innovation in Catholic higher education. Either Finney wasn’t paying attention, or at the time of the rechartering he still trusted Byrne and was willing to cover for him in Rome.

Byrne, however, was no longer given the benefit of the doubt after Finney’s canonical visit a year later. The rumors getting back to him about Byrne’s plans for the auditorium must have been particularly irritating in light of what he had already seen for himself. The controversy over the theater became particularly heated among the confreres, once they got wind of Byrne’s plan to cover its costs by renting it out to commercial theatrical groups whose performances were not directly under the control of the university. Working with theater people and other such low-lifes was pushing openness to the point of recklessness.

As the provincial’s faith in him was disintegrating, so, according to McHugh, was Byrne’s health. He discreetly noted that Byrne had become ill in the autumn and winter of 1908, spent several months convalescing in Saint Joseph’s Hospital, and was succeeded in office by Martin, in May 1909. He also recorded a comment, made years later by Nuelle, that best explains Byrne’s removal from the presidency: “I have some vague notions that the failure of the College Theater had much to do with stalling the really grand dreams which a really saintly—if unlucky—priest had entertained for the glory of God and the salvation of college students.” (21)

Ironically enough, the auditorium was the place where DePaul’s commitment to equality of educational opportunity for both men and women, as set forth in its charter, was eventually fulfilled. McHugh recounts that in 1911 DePaul hosted the annual meeting of the National Catholic Educational Association, a large gathering that included some 1,100 Catholic nuns,
many of whom were so impressed with the new facilities in the Lyceum and auditorium buildings that they enrolled in DePaul's first summer school, given for "sisters, lay teachers, and advanced students." Of course, the summer school, which paved the way for DePaul to become coeducational in 1917, didn't just materialize from thin air. On December 28, 1910, Archbishop Quigley expressed a desire to see DePaul provide degree-related extension programs that would allow Catholic women to meet the educational requirements for hiring and promotion in the Chicago public school system. The board of trustees, Goodchild reports, met that very day and approved plans for the summer school. It enrolled 125 religious and lay women in July 1911, was accredited by the superintendent of the Chicago public schools in fall 1911, and conferred the first DePaul collegiate degrees on women in spring 1912. (22) McHugh nicely captures the spirit of the event, which finally vindicated Byrne's visionary but risky building program: "[The] History of DePaul was in the making. [The] Theater or Auditorium building and Lyceum had been quite a care for nearly five years, but now they began to pay dividends in a manner hardly visualized by their founders and promoters." (23) Continuing innovation, often born of necessity, was Byrne's vision and legacy for DePaul.

A Foundling's Legacy

Does this account of Saint Vincent DePaul's foundling university make its past useful to DePaul in the next century? I think so. Facing the uncertainties of DePaul's infancy may be painful, but helps to account for many of the tensions that affect the university's present and future. Then as now the university's ambitions far outstrip its resources. Although DePaul may no longer aspire to compete on an equal footing with either Northwestern or the University of Chicago, it anticipates taking a unique leadership role in American higher education well beyond the constraints imposed by the university's relatively modest endowment and operating budgets. Then as now, all of us who care about DePaul worry about its Catholic identity: in what sense, if any, can DePaul, the diverse urban university, meaningfully claim to be Catholic? Retrieving DePaul's institutional memory of its perilous birth may afford us a degree of comfort by affirming that there have been few points in the university's history when its Catholic identity has not been analyzed and disputed.

Our aspirations relating to public service in Chicago today, described in Richard Meister's opening chapter, may require just as much flexibility on the question of Catholic identity as the exigencies of yesterday's crisis over institutional survival. Byrne could risk being flexible because he was confident of the superiority of the inherited Catholic intellectual tradition that was reflected, primarily, in the philosophy curriculum. A strong program in Scholastic philosophy, he reckoned, could be relied upon to give direction to the university's innovative elective system. Today the university may be less able to live with ambiguity, precisely because confidence in the Catholic intellectual tradition has apparently been seriously eroded, and not just at DePaul. The days are long gone when philosophy programs at Catholic colleges and
universities reflected a distinctively Catholic approach to intellectual life. Nothing, alas, has emerged to take their place.

So Saint Vincent's foundling, now all grown up and on her own, must face her second century with certain unresolved questions about her ancestry and who or what she may yet turn out to be. The university's Vincentian heritage does not provide easy answers to such questions, but now as then it will continue to beckon with a love for DePaul that is sometimes more, and sometimes less, than justice.

University Seal, 1920.

Chapter Two Notes


7. "P.V. Byrne, C.M.: Correspondence," a folder containing various handwritten letters, in the DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives, Perryville, Missouri, (DRMA, II C (MO) 3, Box 32).
12. A clarification is called for here, because this thesis marks Lester F. Goodchild's otherwise reliable and insightful analysis of DePaul's early history. Here is the gist of Goodchild's view:

"Byrne was a man enamored with the intellectual life and the liberal Catholic spirit. Byrne's sentiment reflected the "Americanist" ideas which swept through a significant segment of the American Catholic church during this period. ... They [the Americanists] called for a rapprochement between American Catholicism and the American way of life. The "Americanists" emphasized the glory of the intellectual life and the pursuit of higher education which other American bishops, especially those of German descent (sic), opposed. ... The Americanists possessed a quasi-ecumenical spirit, a concern for the material prosperity and development of American Catholics, and a vision of the American Catholic responsibility to lead world-wide Catholicism into a rapprochement with the modern world, a world which was most clearly evident in the American experience. These ideas ignited Byrne as president of Kenrick Theological Seminary." Goodchild, "Mission of the Catholic University in the Midwest," 238-9.

My own view is that these "Americanist" ideas are either so vague as to be the common property of virtually all Church leaders at the time, or, when specified in comprehensibly Americanist ways, insufficiently warranted as Byrne's own. In the former category of vagueness, I place a passion for the intellectual life and a concern for the material prosperity of American Catholics, which, no doubt, even bishops of German descent were committed to. In the latter category of distinctively Americanist ideas, I place the vision of an American Catholicism assuming a global leadership role in modernizing the Roman church worldwide. This was, in fact, an idea derived from the thoughts of Father Isaac Hecker, and overzealously championed by certain French liberals who provoked the Papal condemnation of "Americanism." What Pope Leo XIII in 1899 condemned as "Americanism" is quite specific, even if-as prominent American Catholic leaders, like James Cardinal Gibbons, at the time insisted—no one here holds such an extreme view. Leo condemned the idea "that a certain liberty ought to be introduced into the Church, so that, limiting the exercise and vigilance of its powers, each one of the faithful may act more freely in pursuance of his own natural bent and capacity." See Pope Leo XIII, "Testem benevolentiae," January 22, 1899, in Documents of American Catholic History, John Tracy Ellis, ed., Milwaukee, 1956, 536.

In other words, the Pope felt that "Americanists" were advocating the wholesale democratization of the Church, by introducing a certain liberty into it that Americans take for granted in the ordering of their civic institutions. Such a proposal on its merits may hold some attraction to American Catholics, both then and now. See for instance, Dennis P. McCann, New Experiment in Democracy: The Challenge for American Catholicism (Kansas City, Missouri, 1987), but I see no evidence either that Byrne wasted much time on it or that his vision of DePaul, and its inspiration, is unintelligible apart from it.

What prompted Goodchild to link Byrne, prior to his Presidency at DePaul University, with others accused of Americanism is first, Byrne's Irish ethnicity which he holds in common with many other Catholic leaders so accused, like Cardinal Gibbons and Archbishop John Ireland, second Byrne's impatience with the slow rate of academic preparation on the part of Catholic seminary professors, and third, Byrne's consequent support for requiring faculty assigned to teach at Kenrick to attend courses at the Catholic University of America, allegedly a hotbed of Americanist thinking. The only concrete evidence that Goodchild can muster is Byrne's meeting with Ireland in September, 1895, in Saint Paul, Minnesota, on the topic of clergy education. Well, as the rector of Kenrick Seminary, what else would he be conferring with the archbishop about? Certainly not the overthrow of the Catholic hierarchy! Goodchild could also have appealed to Byrne's civic mindedness, as demonstrated by his extracurricular activities in Cape Girardeau. But openness alone, I would hope, does not warrant condemning—or glorifying, for that matter—Byrne as an Americanist heretic.

This disagreement over Byrne's alleged Americanism is not trivial. For it does make a difference in Goodchild's interpretation of Byrne's policies, especially his depiction of Byrne's actions during the transition from Saint Vincent's College to DePaul University. Goodchild correctly notes that Byrne's administration of Saint Vincent's College faithfully followed the mandate for a mixed institution given by the provincial, Father Smith, until Smith's death in 1905. But then Goodchild speculates, "Part of the reason for this involved Leo XIII's (1901-1903) condemnation of Americanism. ..." Goodchild, A Mission of the Catholic University in the Midwest," 241. The implication is that Byrne did not act upon his "Americanist" vision of DePaul University any earlier because of cowardice, as if Byrne were afraid to reveal his own attachment to the ideas that Leo had just condemned. There is no basis whatsoever for this assumption. Byrne's actions admit of a simpler explanation, and a simpler explanation may be preferred because Byrne, it seems to me, may be a simpler character than Goodchild imagines. Byrne, in short, was a faithful Vincentian who carried out the assignment that he had been given. He began to act on his own, only when his original mission had been rendered moot by Archbishop Quigley's reckless actions. When he did begin to innovate, his policies conform to no distinctively Americanist agenda in Catholic higher education, for there never was such a thing. His innovations were a desperate gamble, now that the Archbishop had acted, attempting to define a market niche in Chicago for a small Catholic college that could only survive if it risked becoming a university administered under Catholic auspices.

14. McHugh, "DePaul University, 1898-1920," "Transitional Period (A)," pp. 1-11, and "Transitional Period (B)," pp. 1-9, in DPUA.
15. McHugh, "DePaul University, 1898-1920," "Transitional Period (B)," p. 2, in DPUA.
16. ibid.
17. McHugh, "DePaul University, 1898-1920," "Transitional Period (B)," pp. 10-16, in DPUA. I am including the full text of the "First Annual Report" as an appendix to this paper, because of its historic significance.
20. This seems to be the clear implication of Finney's report to Fiat, as quoted in Goodchild, "Mission of the Catholic University in the Midwest," 249: "Cum Iubismodi institutsa apud nos nomine "Universitas" solent designari contraea nonri precisus quorumdam presbyterorum diocessarum et secularum et religiosorum, morum generis, nomen Collegii munerae consilium interuenit. Psycho ergo utiile DePauli University fructem; minime dubium quin exitus hujus instituti futurus sit felix et faustus."
21. McHugh, "DePaul University, 1898-1920," "Lyceum and Theater," p. 11, in DPUA.
23. McHugh, "DePaul University, 1898-1920," "Lyceum and Theater," p. 18, in DPUA.