

Father Patrick Dowd Refuses to be a Bishop

By
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A happy conversation that took place within the last three weeks in Toronto has transformed this paper from a general view of the great Pastor of St. Patrick's that Father Patrick Dowd undoubtedly was, into a closeup picture of the same humble Sulpician refusing to become the Coadjutor Bishop of Toronto. This conversation revealed that His Eminence the Cardinal Archbishop of that See had lately had some work done on the archiepiscopal archives and that in the process, what should turn up but the original letters of Father Dowd to Bishop Charbonnel on the occasion of his appointment by Pope Pius IX to be Coadjutor of the second Bishop of Toronto. It was but natural that one should turn also to the archives of the Old Seminary of St. Sulpice where Father was in residence at the time to complete the story by seeing what survives of the letters of the good Bishop to Father Dowd. With these in hand, it seemed possible to give in considerable detail the stages of this incident in Father Dowd's life and leave to some other pen and hand the task of brushing a fuller picture of the whole life. How revealing these letters are, I will leave you to judge for yourselves by the quotations that I will endeavour to provide in the course of this paper.

Patrick Dowd was born in the County Louth in Ireland, in the year 1813, and we are told by J. J. Curran K.C. in the little book describing the Golden Jubilee of this priest, that his parents were in good circumstances. He did his classics at Newry, in his native diocese of Armagh, and his theology at Paris, at St. Sulpice, or at the Irish College, and there on May 20th, 1837, he was ordained to the Holy Priesthood by Archbishop Quelen, Archbishop of Paris. The next ten years of his priesthood he spent in and about Armagh, six of them with the Archbishop and one as the President of the Diocesan Seminary ... It was this post that he gave up to join Saint Sulpice, make his year of solitude or spiritual training, and thence come to Montreal to work among the Irish immigrants. His life in Montreal began on June 21st, 1848. For the following twelve years he was a Curate at St. Patrick's under Father J. J. Connolly, who was three years his junior in age and six years in priestly ordination. A keener, more vigorous and enterprising curate one could hardly imagine, for in those years Father Dowd founded St Patrick's Orphanage, St Bridge's Home, now dedicated to his own memory even in name, and at least one other work of charity to take care of the girls who were in domestic

service here.

The incident that I am going to relate takes place a short five years after his arrival in Montreal. The letters all bear the dates of 1853, in a letter to Archbishop Charbonnel in the middle of our incident, Father Pinsonneault, who was later to be the first Bishop of London, Ontario, states that he had recommended Father Dowd to the Bishop of Toronto as a likely candidate for the Episcopacy: “obstinacy (sic!) is a defect in M. Dowd, which I had not observed when I spoke to you so highly about him and recommended him for your Coadjutor.” (Letter dated June 27th, 1853, in Toronto Archdiocese Archives). It is to be noted that the 39 year old Curate had been already attracting attention as being of episcopal timber, for at the very outset of the correspondence we have in hand, of Jan. 28th, 1853, Father Dowd is careful to state in his letter to Bishop Charbonnel that he had already in a previous conversation at the Seminary with his correspondent made clear his reasons for refusing the elevation. It would seem therefore that the incident of which we treat is the second such.

The Bishops of the sole Archdiocese of those days, Quebec, had met and passed upon the candidate and sent their appreciation to the Congregation of the Propaganda. The great Pio Nono was the Pope gloriously reigning and he was to make three efforts to have Father Dowd accept this second appointment as Coadjutor, surely an eloquent testimony of how deeply the humble Sulpician was sought by his fellows in the hierarchy here in Canada.

REVEALS CONVICTION OF INCOMPATIBILITY

For this second incident, the Holy See chose to send out the Bulls of appointment directly, these bore the date of December 17th, 1852. The notification of their issue arrived in the country before the documents, and on January 28th, 1853, Father Dowd is acknowledging a first letter from Toronto telling him of the renewal of Bishop Charbonnel’s supplication for his appointment as Coadjutor. Here are the words of the appointee: “I hasten to assure your Lordship that it fills me with unmixed pain to find that your Lordship has again renewed your supplication for my appointment.” (Letter Jan. 28th, Toronto Archives). He then proceeds to give a final argument, one that he had passed over out of a feeling of veneration for this Lordship, though this argument now to be quoted and very personal, seems on the surface to be a decisive one, it must be remembered that Father Dowd was later appointed to Kingston, and equally refused on that occasion.

He writes: “the time is come when I think it a duty not to conceal from your Lordship anything which might eventually effect the welfare of the diocese over which God has placed you, and if I do not entirely mistake your Lordship’s character, I know my candour under such circumstances will not be misunderstood.

“Permit me, my Lord, to avow my most anxious fears that I could not co-operate with your Lordship in the administration of the diocese with that unity of sentiment and harmony of views which the interests of religion, as well as our mutual happiness would require.” (Ibid)

We come here to a question of conjecture as to what might have been, for much later on May 10th, Bishop Charbonnel took up this very point of incompatibility of temperament and wrote a letter to Father Dowd. “Come and try, and if we do not get along, we shall try some other means. Your difficulties will change neither the Bishops of the Province nor the Holy See . . . You have scarcely known me! and I hope that I will not make you too unhappy! and then, I have already told you that it is my intention to ask for a division of the diocese . . . Spare me, dear brother, spare me these new writings and petitions which consume precious time . . . Obey, as I did, and you will not regret it! Meanwhile, God knows that at that very moment I will be happy to pass over to you the whole administration and withdraw to some small corner. I pray the Blessed Virgin and St. Patrick to plead my case and to bring you soon where God wills that you be.” (Toronto Archives, May 10th, 1853).

Now, the curious thing about this letter is that it apparently never reached Father Dowd, for in the handwriting of Bishop Charbonnel, are inscribed on the back page, the following words: “This letter returned to me sealed in September, 1853, through Mr. Donovan, student in Quebec, I do not know why.” Would such a letter with definite assurances on this grave matter have changed the mind of Father Dowd? On the basis of a reading of all correspondence, one would say no, for the feeling of aversion to the high office, the “fearful elevation,” as he calls it elsewhere, were very deep-rooted in Father Dowd and will be shown later.

FATHER DOWD PETITIONS HOLY SEE

To follow a chronological order in this year; 1853, we now come to Father Dowd’s next step. Having learned from some of his friends, or in conversation, that the Holy See had been petitioned once again to command his acceptance of the post, Father Dowd composed his own letter directly to the Holy Father. It is dated April 11th, and is written in a smooth, sonorous Latin. In it he appeals to the merciful heart of the Holy Father not to issue such a command in virtue of holy obedience. He pleads his ever growing conviction that he is not called to fulfil the office of episcopacy, his lack of the kind of knowledge necessary to successfully combat the enemies of the church in Toronto, “who are armed with the civil power and the power of numbers and the education in human letters that make it most difficult to do battle with them.” More than that, he is overwhelmed at the weakness of his virtue, “hen, jam nimis probate” and sees in the episcopacy an almost evident

danger to his eternal salvation! It is something that he fears many times more than death itself.

Lates in the same month of April, Father Dowd is writing to the Bishop of Toronto to tell" him that when the Bulls arrived and the Superior came to present them to him, he refused to accept them and was waiting the reply of the Holy See to his request. He is full of regret for the annoyance he may be causing the Bishop: "believe me, I would be disposed to sacrifice anything less dear to me than the welfare of my soul to save your Lord. ship pain." (Letter April 24th Archives of Toronto). "Your Lordship will perceive that I can take no new step before the judgement of the Holy See is made known." (Ibid)

Rome's answer came in the month of May. The first letter was in reply to the request of the Bishops who had reported the resistance being offered to the Holy See's appointment by the candidate. The terms of this letter seemed to shake the resolution of Father Dowd, for in it he read: "it is necessary that you accept the burden, this is the will (Mentem) of the Holy Father. Therefore acknowledging the will of God, it will be your duty to receive the episcopal Consecration and betake yourself to Toronto." (Document Number one, Propaganda April 27th, 1853, in Arch. of St. Sulpice Seminary, Montreal.) Some of the members of the hierarchy closest to the events saw in such words an order to Father Dowd. Bishop Bourget reporting to Toronto states that "I received to-day, a little before noon, the Apostolic Letters giving Monseigneur Dowd the order to accept the Coadjutorship of Toronto." He then goes on to describe the scene when he delivered the letter: "Immediately after dinner I went myself to the Seminary to make known to the Bishop-elect the will of the Holy Father. The Victim, after some hesitation, submitted and only asked for some delay to postpone the hour of sacrifice until he had prepared and had had the time to hear from the Propaganda the answer to his letter." (Toronto Archives, May 23rd, 1853).

SEEMING TO ACCEPT HIS APPOINTMENT

On receipt of this letter from the Bishop of Montreal, Bishop Charbonnel seems to be overjoyed, for two days later, May 25th, he begins a joyous letter to Father Dowd, as follows: "God, Jesus, Mary, St. Michel of Toronto, St. Patrick of Armagh, bless your resignation and obedience . . . And your sacrifice is made: I will immediately order public thanksgiving and prayers for your consecration: I would wish to make my annual retreat at the same time you will be making yours for being consecrated. Let us become one, altogether one, in the hearts of Jesus and Mary and immolate all our existence to the glory of God and His Church and the sanctification of the souls entrusted to our unworthiness."

He then recalls that on the morrow he will be three years consecrated

and will offer his Mass for his new Coadjutor. One feels that the story is about to come to a conclusion, and so it would have been, had not Father Dowd begged for a delay to await the answer to his own request made to the Holy Father the previous month.

We now move into the month of June, but before relating the answer referred to above, we offer a conjecture that Father Dowd spent that month in prayer and reflection and also in close study of the terms of the letter he had just received following the protest of the Bishops at his unwillingness to accept the first news of his elevation. This conjecture is easily supported by the trend of events that follow. By June 17th, the reply to Father Dowd's own request had arrived. His friend, Father Pinsonneault, was delegated to bring it to him from the Bishop's house in Montreal. The following day, June 18th, Father Pinsonneault reported in a letter to Toronto what had transpired. The situation reverted completely to what it had been previously.

But let us hear Father Pinsonneault's own words: "When I delivered it into his own hands, he felt rather nervous for a while, then, having invited me to follow him into his room, he broke the seal and read it silently and then exclaimed: "Deo gratias, I am safe" – Having read it myself, I found that Monseigneur Barnabo apprises Father Dowd that his last letter was placed before the Holy Father who in answer directed the Secretary to write simply "adconfirmandum" what was written lately in answer to the Bishop of Toronto's 2nd application. Now the *modus ratiocinandi* of Fr. Dowd runs thus: The Bishop has begged the Holy Father to give me a positive command to accept – I have, myself, written to the Holy Father begging not to be forced and stating that nothing short than a positive command in *virtute obedientiae* shall ever induce me to accept. Well, although I see that the Holy Father *wishes* me to submit, yet he declines to force me by a positive order: Ergo, I am not obliged to accept.

"Then he gave me a copy of the letter he had written to the Pope, and, by the bye, it was a famous letter, of which the conclusion was that unless the Holy Father expresses His Will by an *absolute command in virtute obedientiae*, his firm resolution is to continue to decline a dignity which he feared more than death." (Toronto Archives Fr. Pinn. June 18th. 1853). The letter goes on to say that if the Bishop were to have a copy of Father Dowd's letter to the Holy See, and the reply just received, he himself would agree with Father Dowd. The writer was subsequently rebuked for such a conclusion. I cannot leave this letter without quoting Father Pinsonneault's opinion that will seem even more mirth-provoking to-day for a different reason: "Certainly Toronto is a queer place and very hard to accommodate with Bishops." (Ibid)

THE BISHOPS INTERVENE: SOME PRESSURE AT ST. SULPICE

If Father Pinsonneault was able to give in detail the process of reasoning by which Father Dowd considered himself safe, and that already on June 17th on reading the letter, the passing of time until the next step in this incident served apparently only to make appointee stronger in his feeling that he had won his case. On the other hand, the Bishops concerned were very clear that Father Dowd was resisting the will of the Holy Father and they even went so far as to say that he had dictated the very expressions to be employed by the Holy See, if he must become a Bishop. They went further and took what they considered appropriate action.

Bishop Charbonnel wrote to the Provincial Superior of St. Sulpice imploring; the intervention of the latter to bring about Father, Dowd's acquiescence. Father Billaudel spoke to Father Dowd about the matter and then the latter wrote directly to Bishop Charbonnel his reply to this action. This letter dated July 16th, and another five days later, are four-page documents that constitute the high point, the peak of this whole affair. They also demonstrate that Father Dowd was possessed of all the knowledge of theology, the depth of feeling and the capacity to handle a difficult situation with mastery, all in short that would have made of him a most outstanding prelate of the Church. What is more, they compel the reader to speculate on what might have been the future of the Church in Toronto, and indeed, all Upper Canada, had he been prevailed upon to accept his call to the hierarchy.

I will be pardoned a long quotation from this letter, I hope, when my audience is put in position to hear Father Dowd's own words and reasoning in his defence of the attitude he assumed. Here are his words on the interpretation of the letter of the Holy See, both that of April 27th and that of May 18th already referred to:

"Your Lordship is surprised that I still hesitate to accept after the clear expression of the Pope's Will. Permit me to explain that in my letter to Rome I implored the Holy Father not to enforce my acceptance by a command "virtute obedientiæ," as I feared the burden of the episcopacy more than death itself. The reply does not give such command. It is merely a confirmation of the desire of the Holy Father expressed in the letter of April 27th. I did not expect a more favourable reply. All I asked has been granted. And for this kind, considerate indulgence of our good Supreme Pastor I shall during life deem it tenfold my duty to implore the benediction of Heaven."

Coming to grips with the appeal to have his own religious Superior intervene to urge its acceptance on the grounds of obedience, Father Dowd reasons thus:

"As the Holy Father has not thought it right to command by obedience in a matter so personal to myself as to touch most closely on the eternal salvation of my soul, Your Lordship will not fail to understand the extremely painful and embarrassing position in which Your Lordship places me by

calling upon my Superior to exercise his authority over me in the same matter.

“In very many respects I feel my shortcomings in what regards the knowledge as well as the spirit of St. Sulpice. However, in this particular point I feel confident that I can repose myself on the examples of the holiest and most perfect of those who have adorned our society before our day.

The examples of obedience quoted by Your Lordship makes me tremble more, for they served to remind me of other examples that do apply to my case æ St. Austin, St. Augustine, etc., etc.”

One more charge had been made: Father Dowd was accused of dictating the terms to be employed by the Pope and this leaves him stunned. Here is the reply:

“It must be through inadvertence, Your Lordship states that I dictated or thought to dictate the expressions to be employed by His Holiness in replying to my letter. This misapprehension would be removed, did Your Lordship see my letter, but I regret that Your Lordship should, after the explanations I gave Your Lordship in the Seminary, still think that I am merely following my own undirected will. I do humbly hope that I have taken all the ordinary means of ascertaining the will of God in my regard, and that I do not neglect the precautions necessary to avoid the deception into which I might be so easily led, in this grave matter, had I no better guide than my own will.

““Believe me, My Lord, the reflection and the experience of every day confirm me the more in the conviction that I am not called to be a bishop in any place, least of all in Toronto.”

The last words of this letter sum up the position in relation to any superior below the Holy Father touchingly and with some sentences that His Eminence thought worthy of a stylist like Churchill:

“In God's name, I implore Your Lordship to allow me the liberty which the Holy Father does not wish to deprive me of; do not urge him to depart from the merciful conduct towards me which his own heart inspires.

“My conscience forbids me ever to accept whilst it is possible to refuse. Can you think it well to do violence in the last degree, to this rooted conviction? Pardon, My Lord, the length of this letter and the liberty with which it is written. I feel too much in the matter, not only as it affects myself, but as it may affect the dearest interests of Toronto not to express myself with candor.”

FURTHER PAIN: BISHOP BOURGET'S PLAN

Having answered the intervention of his own Superior, Father Dowd had to face one more degree of pain in his continuing refusal. This farther pressure never actually came about, but the knowledge that it had been

contemplated was enough to grieve Father Dowd's heart greatly. Bishop Bourget who had thought the matter closed when he read Father Dowd the terms of the first letter from the Congregation of the Propaganda, as we have already seen above, believed that Father Dowd was unduly shirking the burden of the episcopacy and again that if his example were allowed to pass unrebuked in a growing country like Canada, there would be considerable difficulties in appointing Bishops in the future. Here is the plan he thought called for. We know of it because Bishop Charbonnel referred to it in a letter of July 18th, 1853 (Archives of St. Sulpice) but also because there is a letter in the Toronto Archives from Father Pinsonneault telling Bishop Charbonnel of the plan on foot and explaining his own action in delaying the measure until such time as Toronto had been consulted. When the advisability of the plan was asked of Bishop Charbonnel, he scotched the proposal with all his might.

Now, what was this proposal? Briefly, it was a letter written by Bishop Bourget while on pastoral visitation, in which, to quote Father Pinsonneault, the Bishop "was most decidedly certain that he (Father Dowd) a été sous l'influence malheureuse d'une déplorable erreur de jugement; (TRANS. he was under the unhappy influence of a deplorable error of judgement) in his obstinate opposition to the will of the Holy Father: that owing to this, his manifest disobedience to the Supreme Pastor, he (The Bishop) could no longer continue to keep him in his diocese, and therefore, that unless he submitted, his powers would be withdrawn immediately, his services not being required any longer." (Toronto Archives 1853).

Bishop Bourget left it to his Chapter in Council to decide whether this should be sent to Father Dowd and there it was that Father Pinsonneault succeeded in having the most interested party, the Bishop of Toronto, consulted beforehand. Bishop Charbonnel killed the proposal and told Father Dowd of his own action in a letter dated July 18th, 1853 (Arch. Sent. de St. Sulpice, Montreal, 1853).

However, the knowledge that such a proposal had ever been contemplated grieved the heart of the young man in Montreal. The day after he received Bishop Charbonnel's letter, Father Dowd sent a long letter to Toronto that deserves to be put beside the one just treated, that of July 16th. It is written under the influence of great emotion and it is perhaps the most incisive, in its reasoning, as it is the most eloquent in its expression of this whole batch of letters that we have been considering. If Father Dowd's resistance is to be described as obstinacy, it is here made doubly clear that it springs from a very real fear for the salvation of his own soul; if he must advance into the danger he senses that it must only be under the protection of a positive command from the Supreme Pontiff. Here are the words in which at the end of this letter, Father Dowd appeals to Bishop Charbonnel, stating that he is convinced that his salvation hangs on his refusing the

episcopacy. Then, “if Your Lordship believes that I write the truth and that all is not mere acting, or at best the exaggeration of the moment, I beg Your Lordship in the name of our merciful Father, who knows my heart, not to be insensible to the misery of one who would without hesitation give his life to advance the interests of religion in any part of the globe, and who refuses the burden now offered only because he believes, that in exposing his own soul, he cannot either please God or benefit the Church.” (Toronto Archives July 21st, 1853).

These words came at the conclusion of this long letter, and I quote them here to emphasize the utter sincerity of the feelings that dictated the attitude of Father Dowd in the whole affair.

The beginning of this letter is equally full of feeling:

“Your Lordship's communication (telling him of Bishop Bourget's unfulfilled proposal) wounds me to the very heart ... I was not prepared to expect that my infirmity would be so severely punished by my much esteemed Bishop, whilst our Common Father treated it with so much indulgence. Were I menaced from any other quarter, it is most certainly to him I would turn for protection. – But if it be necessary, let me be chastised even by the hand that I venerate the most!”

HIS DEFENCE

He now turns to his defence:

“In the view that I have taken of the Pope's letter, I have not trusted to my own judgement alone; I have consulted capable persons who have no interest in my remaining in Montreal. Not one of those consulted could discern an *order* or an *injunction* or any more than a strong expression of the Pope's Will or desire that I should accept. The Bishop of Montreal admitted to myself that the letter did not contain a *formal order*.”

There follows this incisive reasoning which retains its force so long as one takes the strict view of the field of obedience adopted by Father Dowd.

“When there is no order, how am I to be constrained by a menace of the severest punishment, to obey? Where the Pope in his consummate wisdom abstains from the exercise of that plenitude of authority which God has given him, can it be thought that any inferior authority can wisely intervene?”

Evidently Bishop Bourget had mentioned to him that it would be more perfect to yield a ready obedience to the mere intimation of the will of His Holiness. That too, offers a difficulty, but he has an answer;

“This, I admit, in ordinary cases; but even so the not doing what would be most perfect, does not constitute a sin – and most certainly is, not a crime to be punished by ecclesiastical censure.”

He then proceeds to show that in his case to do what would seem the more perfect would be to violate his own conscience and commit what would

be in effect a crime. This is very strong, language, but it is sustained by equally strong convictions. So strong was his conviction that Father Dowd left no stone unturned in his effort not to become a Bishop. We find in his correspondence a letter of appeal to Cardinal Mazzoni, the then Prefect of the Congregation of the Propaganda, asking his intervention in order that no command be issued. (Letter of August 22nd, 1853) (Archives of St. Sulpice).

Earlier we mentioned a third letter from the Congregation of the Propaganda. It is dated July 13th, and in it much the same terms are used to urge the Bishop-elect to accept; "His Holiness ordered it written that it is his will that you should obey and accept the onus." Pursuing his same line of reasoning, Father Dowd could see in it no more of an order than in the previous communications from the Holy See. Further proof of his sincerity may be found in a letter to his spiritual advisor in France, Father J. Faillon, S.S., the noted Historian. Here he outlines his stand; "the possibility of being separated from our dear Society to which I see myself exposed, increases a hundredfold my attachment for it, and makes me feel much more sensibly my great need for the protection of its holy rule, as well as the encouragement of the example of my good confreres." (Letter of Nov. 7th 1853, Archives of Seminary of St. Sulpice). He then goes on to ask his advice on what stand he could take if, as his information states, he is summoned before the Provincial Council to be held in May 1854.

CONCLUSION

Not having had access to the report of this Council, we do not know if this measure was taken or not, but sufficient clear evidence has been adduced to conclude that it was genuine fear of approximate danger to his soul and its eternal salvation that Father Dowd saw in the episcopacy that must be accepted as the ultimate and real reason for his refusal. One need not bring a judgement to bear on the strict accuracy of his theological interpretation of the Holy Father's will. One can discern a consuming devotion to the ideals of the hidden life of St. Sulpice, and also a similar devotion to the interests of the Irish Congregation of Montreal, that was to be served with all the energy and love that he could command in the remaining thirty-eight years that Father Dowd lived in the City and Parish of his adoption.