

Charles Pettit McIlvaine Letters

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1-28-1863

## Letter to Charles Pettit McIlvaine

Thomas Bacon

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St. Rev. C. P. McSwain D.D. S.C.S.  
Bp. of Ohio

K. MS. 630128

New Orleans Jan. 25<sup>th</sup> 1863

St. Rev. Father;

May I beg you to read this circular as a matter of general concern to the Church in these times. I seem to have been called by God's Providence to the duty therein indicated, and I enter upon it very seriously. I am perhaps the only clergyman in the "seceded" dioceses, who, while remaining in the South after the war began, and having his home still there, - never complied in any manner with the unlawful changes in the Church service and government. For this I was virtually silenced for more than a year, resigning my old parish at Natchitoches, - and really, in effect, forbidden to exercise the sacred office which is my duty and my greatest pleasure. I suffer now greatly, not only in fortune but still more in separation from my wife (now in the Red River country) to whom I have not been able to communicate a word for eight months, nor to hear from her.

I press much that is very trying and painful in my present duty, and therefore I beg your prayers sympathy and counsel in this new and unprecedented condition of affairs.

Your own servant in Christ

Thomas Scott Bacon

P.S. Of course I am not the clergyman of whom so much was said of his officiating in St. Paul's Ch. while under suspension by Bp. Polk. He, (Rev. S. E. Barr.) it seems had been already restored by Bp. P.; but he is no longer officiating in the city but as a chaplain in the army. B.

To the Members of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Louisiana :

Dear Brethren—

Two years ago we were joined in Christian fellowship with devout people throughout the United States, and, in unison with them, worshipped with a form of "Common Prayer," which had always met all our spiritual wants, and was most dear and hallowed. There has been a great change since. Has it been a change for the better? Has it made us more spiritual, more charitable and more meek? and has it made the Church flourish and grow?

Whatever doubts individuals may have had about all this, it has been commonly supposed among you that the clergymen, to whom the people, of course, looked for counsel and guidance, were unanimously agreed that this change was right and even necessary; that there was but one side to the question. This is an error. More than one of your clergy dissented from the prevailing policy. Their objections ought to be presented to you and weighed by you in the fear of God. Though I am but a solitary Presbyter, I am sure I do not now violate modesty or charity, nay, I am but following my plain duty in thus personally addressing you. Heretofore I have preferred, from various motives, but chiefly from a desire to avoid contention, a respect and affection for many of my brethren committed to the other view, a hope that with silent patience the occasion might yet arise for "a better mind" in all,—I have preferred to withhold any public expression of my opinion. Yet I have never, in any manner, *directly* or *indirectly*, given any one just reason for thinking that I acquiesced in these changes, but have frequently, in private conversation with their promoters, declared them to be improper, contrary to the law of the Church, and void.

The time seems now to have arrived when this matter ought to be taken up and considered anew; and when, if it shall appear that the Church in Louisiana has been in a false position, it should be extricated therefrom; or that such of its members as shall be so convinced should freely determine upon their duty for the future.

Let it be understood, first of all, that this is not to be decided by the merits of the political and social controversy which has for years been rising in violence until it has broken out in this awful war. Take our own Church, as it stood two years ago, and which, by all agreement, had been preserved from this excitement; and you will find that at least two-thirds of our American bishops and three-fourths of our clergy, with a still larger proportion of our laity, hold substantially the ecclesiastical opinions expressed in this paper. This should entitle those opinions to respectful and kindly attention from all Christian persons. Nor is this a "Southern" and "Northern" question. Examine the list of clergy of this Diocese, and you will see that most of those who take the supposed Southern side are not as much Southern by long residence or permanent interests as I who oppose it. Let it also be remembered that this Diocese has not yet joined what is called the "Prot. Ep. Ch. in the Confederate States."

Those who have made the change have protested against the imputation of using the Church as a political engine. They have always spoken loudly against "political preaching." They say they only wish the Church to adjust itself to the political change. Suppose, now, the result of this war should be the utter overthrow of the Confederate Government and the entire re-establishment of the Federal power. What do they propose to do? They say of the "secession," (see address of Bishop of the Diocese, Jour. Conv., 1861, p. 20:) "This act carried with it the political allegiance of her citizens. Their supreme Government ceased to be that of the United States, and became that of the State of Louisiana, etc. This change of allegiance Churchmen shared in common with others, and it became their duty promptly to demonstrate their recognition of that change in the forms in which the Founder of our Holy Religion required his followers to recognize *de facto* Governments. In the affair of the tribute money he lays down the doctrine that such Governments have a right to claim from their citizens or subjects the support necessary for their effective maintenance—a right founded on the fact that the State as well as the Church is a Divine Institution, under whatever form of organization it may be presented. In the administration of Divine Providence, the Ruler of the Universe casteth down one and putteth up another, choosing for himself the instruments best adapted to effect his ends. So that whether it be Sanhedrim or Cæsar, 'the powers that be are ordained of God.' *They are to be supported, not only with material aid and personal services, but by supplications and prayer.* Hence arises the duty of the Church on the occurrence of any established change of government, to alter her formularies, so as to make them conform to the new condition of things. It was clear, therefore, in the circumstances in which we were placed, that an alteration in the services of the Book of Common Prayer, after the separation of Louisiana from the Government of the United States, was indispensable. It was an alteration forced by the necessity of obedience to the law of Christ himself."

I say, now, what if the Federal power be unquestionably re-established?

The reply, I suppose, is, "That will never be." How do we know that? It is purely a political question of fact. It is, as Bishop Polk reminded us, a matter of Divine Providence, often so mysterious, and which we can never calculate or predict: "so that whether it be Sanhedrim or Cæsar, 'the powers that be are ordained of God.'"

Or suppose the State of Louisiana, or this city and its vicinity alone, is reduced to the Federal obedience—and he must be very unfair who will not admit that this is not an impossible result—shall the prayers of the Church here, in that case, be for a “President of the Confederate States,” or shall no prayers for rulers at all be made, in direct violation of Divine command? Why, even now, what is the *de facto* Government here? What flag flies as the emblem of undisputed power? What law prevails without any attempt at resistance? Even supposing our Convention had lawfully changed the Liturgy, to use again the words of the Bishop of the Diocese (Journ. Conv., p. 21), “What, then, *is* to be done? A conflict now arises between the duty we, as a Diocese, owe to a *Liturgy* which binds us to pray for the rulers of one Government (the Confederate), and the duty we owe to the law of Christ himself, which requires us to pray for those of another (the United States). In such a case, the latter must of necessity prevail.”

If, in such a case, we, as clergy and members of the Episcopal Church in Louisiana, were from any political sentiments or wishes, or from any personal resentments or mortifications, to act as though we belonged to a Church in “the Confederate States,” we should make ourselves a mere political, seditious schism, and might see in the English non-jurors the contempt and extinction which would justly visit us.

No: the truth is that, unconsciously to itself, the Church among us, instead of merely conforming to a political change, has been powerfully worked by those bent upon that change, to bring it about. It was, as events are now showing to the dullest comprehension, a great question of fact just opened—an *attempt*, with a tremendous gulf between its commencement and achievement, yet to be passed, before it could be declared an established *fact* on which the Church should act. It was therefore a cruel injustice to the Church to commit it to such a hazard. Nay, more, it was a sacrilegious outrage thus to use the zeal and devotion of its members for the *political* result, and so involve it in the risk of the wretched indignity of this failure.

Let us now see how this policy has, in effect, worked upon the interests of our Lord's kingdom. I say nothing now of the part (and no small one) which it has had in the tremendous *political* results we see around us.

1. Louisiana has had no Episcopal care or labor for more than a year and a half, and there is no prospect of it within an equal period to come. The Bishop of the Diocese left it just after the Convention of May, 1861, and has never returned, being, it is understood, zealously occupied in other than Episcopal or any manner of clerical functions. Look in the Order for the Consecration of a Bishop, at the solemn questions there answered by him, especially *the sixth*.

2. More than one-third of the clergy then in charge of parishes have ceased their ministrations, and these vacant parishes include more than half of the communicants. I say nothing of the various ways in which this has come about, but of the results to the Church of the chosen policy of the Diocese. The interests also of all the other parishes have suffered terribly. This policy was urged also upon the ground of religious duty to our slave population, to preserve them in peace in their servitude, and thus be the means of the greatest spiritual good to them. What has been its success in this respect? These things appeal to Christian common sense.

I therefore present it as a solemn duty for us—whatever of personal mortification, or pecuniary injury, or unkindness from our friends it may cost—to return to our worship and our fellowship with the Church of the United States, as it existed two years ago. Should you recoil from this on account of the position and well-known sentiments of him who so long presided over this Diocese, and who is so affectionately remembered in that relation, consider that you would not follow him in any other action which was evidently wrong, as in changing your creed. Remember that twenty Bishops who have remained in the exercise of their holy pastoral duties, tell you that his course has been very wrong. Nor does any vote of our Diocesan Convention lay an obligation upon your consciences to separate from the old Church. The wisest churchmen will tell you that such action was beyond the power of that Convention—is null and of no obligation upon you.

As a Presbyterian of Louisiana, I do therefore not only solemnly protest against these unlawful and destructive proceedings, but I beg my brethren of the clergy, and if they refuse, I urge the laity to return to the old ways. The military authority has decided that one of the churches of this city (Christ Church) shall be restored to its original use and trust. There, brethren, you will find your old “Common Prayer” and your old Church fellowship, as they were before these miserable troubles; and there I invite you—1st, the old parishioners of Christ Church; 2d, members of other congregations who do not find that prayer and fellowship in their former places; and lastly, such others of any condition as would like to worship with us. That hallowed place belongs and was consecrated to God for that very purpose. Sustain this by your attendance, and offerings, and prayers; and may the Almighty Lord bless this humble attempt to restore the waste places.

THOMAS S. BACON.