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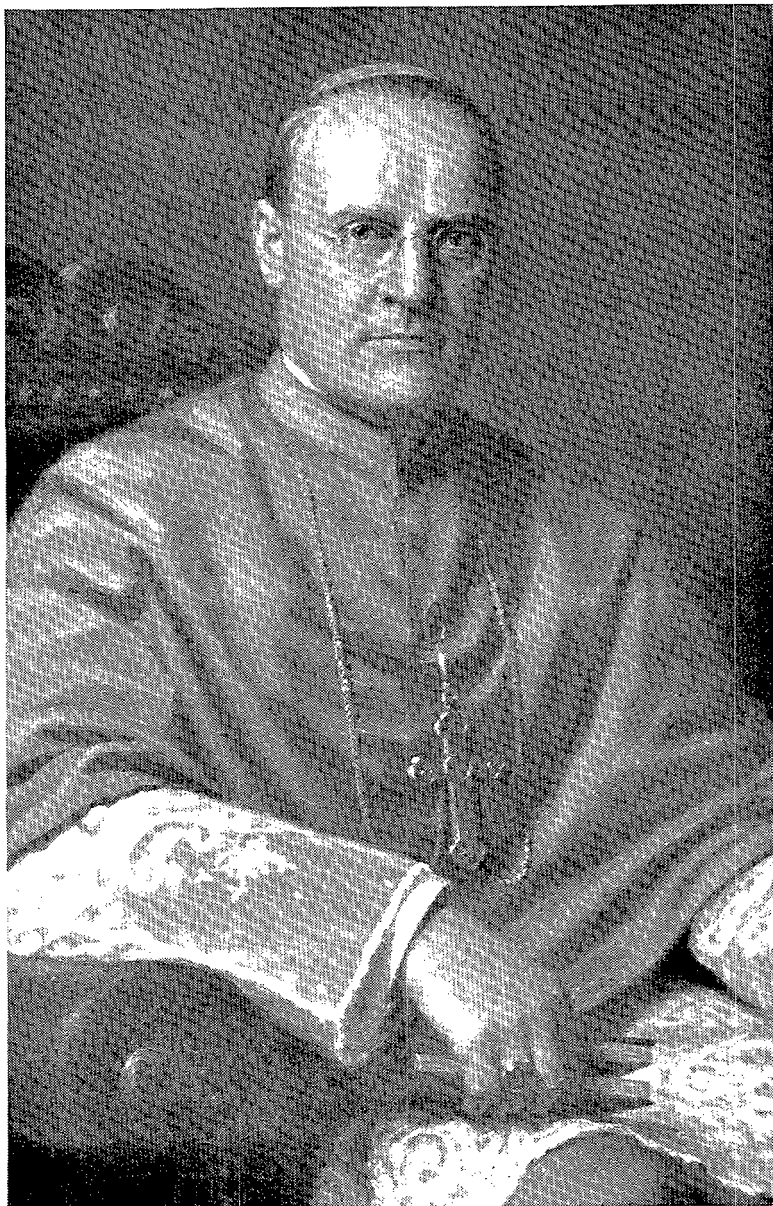
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BISHOP MICHAEL J. CURLEY  
1879-1947

## BISHOP MICHAEL J. CURLEY AND ANTI-CATHOLIC NATIVISM IN FLORIDA

by DAVID P. PAGE

THE FOUR-HUNDRED YEAR history of the Catholic Church in Florida, beginning with the Spanish settlements of the sixteenth century, and continuing through successive English, Spanish, and United States occupations of the peninsula, has not been an entirely peaceful passage. It has been marked by periodic conflicts between Indians and missionaries, missionaries and Spanish officials, missionaries and English raiders, parish priests and governors, parishioners and United States officials, and, finally, during the first half of the nineteenth century, between parish trustees and pastors. In the years between the Civil War and World War I, the church in Florida enjoyed a consoling peace both within her household and without. A particularly amicable relationship was formed between the bishops of this period and the officials of the State of Florida.

In the World War I years, however, a new conflict arose in the church's life which threatened at one point to be as ruinous to Florida Catholicity as any of the earlier conflicts had threatened to be. An outbreak of anti-Catholic nativism in Florida during the years 1910-1917 seriously ruptured church-state relations, and ended in a confrontation between a remarkable young bishop, Michael J. Curley, and a mercurial and colorful anti-Catholic politician, Governor Sidney J. Catts. The hysteria that resulted from this wave of religious nativism became so intense that three Sisters of St. Joseph in the city of St. Augustine were imprisoned in their convent in 1916 on the charge of teaching Negroes in violation of state law. The same movement was a contributing, if not indeed the major, factor in that year's election of Sidney J. Catts as governor of Florida (1917-1921).

Numerous studies have been published on anti-Catholic nativism in the northern United States, but comparatively little has appeared on anti-Catholicism in the South.<sup>1</sup> The truth is that

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1. For the best studies of nativism on the national level see Ray Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860* (New York, 1938); John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns in American Nativism*,

the South, Florida included, was relatively unaffected by the waves of anti-Catholicism that swept intermittently during the nineteenth century over much of the eastern and midwestern regions of the nation. Unquestionably, the Catholic Church was generally viewed in an unfavorable light in the South, where distrust and suspicion of Rome were always present, but these sentiments did not give rise to any significant anti-Catholic movement in that area until the twentieth century. Thus, during the Know-Nothing movement of the 1850s, the bitter anti-Catholic campaign in the North had no counterpart in the South. Again, during the 1893-1894 period, when the American Protective Association was growing throughout the North and Midwest, Southerners were generally apathetic to the anti-Catholic bait and disdained the APA as a Republican tool.<sup>2</sup>

The absence of a militant anti-Catholicism in the South throughout the nineteenth century was undoubtedly due to the small number of Catholics in that area. Yet, with no significant change in the content of southern population, the twentieth century scarcely reached its second decade before the South witnessed an anti-Catholic crusade, so widespread and so intense that its reverberations are still painfully audible in these recent, more ecumenical times.

The sudden appearance of this anti-Catholic ferment is difficult to explain. John Higham thinks that it was an outlet for the expectations that the progressivism of the early twentieth century had raised and then failed to fulfill. The progressive movement, moreover, gave further impetus to the American feeling that the pope was a "reactionary despot, hostile to liberty and progress alike."<sup>3</sup> It may also be remarked that Protestantism and Orthodoxy, particularly in the South, felt threatened by the combined forces of the large city and the labor union, both of which smacked of foreign and Catholic influence.<sup>4</sup> Each of these influences had a greater or lesser part to play in forming the background for the 1910-1917 anti-Catholic campaign, but we have to look elsewhere for its immediate cause.

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1860-1925 (New Brunswick, 1955). For a more recent study that touches on this issue in the South see Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1964).

2. Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 81.

3. *Ibid.*, 178-79.

4. Thomas D. Clark, *The Emerging South* (New York, 1961), 252.

A frustrated radical politician, the noisy Populist leader of the 1890s Tom Watson of Georgia, was the main instigator of the movement that set Florida and the South aflame against Rome. In the August 1910 issue of his *Watson's Jeffersonian Magazine*, the Georgia firebrand published the first chapter of an inflammatory series entitled, "The Roman Catholic Hierarchy: The Deadliest Menace to Our Liberties and Our Civilization." When this series ended Watson started another, an even more virulent one, "The History of the Papacy and the Popes." Each series, upon its completion in the magazine, was published in book or pamphlet form and distributed by the thousands. Thus began a deliberately planned campaign that was to last for seven years.<sup>5</sup>

In 1911, Wilbur Phelps founded the most devastating of all the anti-Catholic periodicals of the period, *The Menace*. Within a year, circulation rose to 120,000; in two years to 500,000; in three years to a million; and at its peak in 1915, to a million and a half copies each week.<sup>6</sup> A crop of other nativist sheets sprang up all over the rural South. The burden of their message was the danger of placing in office Catholics who invariably put loyalty to Rome ahead of loyalty to America. It was firmly and constantly alleged that Rome was scheming to undermine American institutions and to place Catholics in key political positions so that the Vatican's take-over of the White House would be quick and decisive. The pope's secretly organized band of traitors, the Knights of Columbus, were well armed with rifles and were training nightly in church basements. Had not the Knights pledged their fourth degree members to a war of extermination against all Protestants?<sup>7</sup>

Watson and his fellow anti-Catholic propagandists, relying heavily on Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures*, concocted fantastic and bewildering accounts of the goings-on in the popish Church: adult enslavement and infant murder in convents; moral iniquities behind the confessional screen; and nocturnal adventures of lecherous priests who were variously and imaginatively described as "foot kissers" and "bull-necked convent keepers."<sup>8</sup>

5. C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (New York, 1938), 419.

6. Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 180-84.

7. Washington Gladden, "The Anti-Papal Panic," *Harper's Weekly*, LIX (July 18, 1914), 55; Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 178-80.

8. Gustavus Myers, *History of Bigotry in the United States* (New York, 1960), 194; Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel*, 421.

Secret societies, aimed ostensibly at defending American institutions against political candidates who owed superior allegiance to a foreign power, mushroomed throughout the rural South. Chief among these societies was the "Guardians of Liberty," founded in upstate New York in 1911. By 1912, the Guardians had spread to the South and soon wielded strong political power, particularly in Florida.<sup>9</sup> The compass of religious nativism pointed now to the rural South, just as in the previous century it had pointed to the large cities of the North and the eastern seaboard. John Higham has written: "What had issued from Boston, New York, and Philadelphia in the 1840's radiated from the smaller cities of the Middle West in the 1840's and finally found its most valiant champions among the hicks and hillbillies."<sup>10</sup>

Not surprisingly, the history of anti-Catholicism in Florida is similar to that in other parts of the South. Prior to 1910, religion had been a negligible issue in Florida politics.<sup>11</sup> The Florida legislature of 1897 had elected a Catholic, Stephen R. Mallory, II, to the United States Senate.<sup>12</sup> Again in 1902, in the first state-wide primaries ever held in Florida, Mallory was renominated without opposition. As far back as 1878, at the request of Bishop John Moore, second Bishop of St. Augustine (1877-1901), the free schools operated by the Sisters of St. Joseph in St. Augustine were recognized as public schools and supported from public funds. In 1892, St. Joseph's Day School in Mandarin, south of Jacksonville, was recognized and supported as a public school of Duval County.<sup>13</sup>

9. William T. Cash, *History of The Democratic Party in Florida* (Tallahassee, 1936), 124.

10. Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 181.

11. Cash, *Democratic Party in Florida*, 123.

12. Sections three and four of article one of the United States Constitution provided that two senators from each state should be elected by the state legislature. The attempt to free the United States senatorial elections from the dictation of city bosses and the corrupt activities of the railroads and other lobbyists was initiated by the progressives in the late nineteenth century. By 1912, twenty-nine states had adopted laws providing for the direct popular nomination of senators with the practical result that nomination was, as a general rule, in the South equivalent to election. The direct popular election of senators was enacted into federal law by ratification of the seventeenth amendment on May 31, 1913.

13. Sister Mary Alberta, S.S.J., "A Study of the Schools Conducted by the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Diocese of St. Augustine, Florida, 1866-1940" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Florida, 1940), 40-41.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that anti-Catholic prejudice was non-existent in Florida prior to 1910. On the contrary, an account by Father Patrick J. Bresnahan, a diocesan priest, of his 1904-1910 missions to the non-Catholics of rural Florida provides ample witness to their host of latent suspicions, animosities, and misconceptions concerning the Church of Rome.<sup>14</sup> The attitude of the backwoods people may be gathered from an incident during a 1905 mission conducted by Father Bresnahan at Brady's Farm near Madison. The priest recounts with amusement how a little girl, on returning home after the first night of the mission, told her mother that she had seen the priest and that "he looked just like a man."<sup>15</sup> The missionary found during the early years of this century that this prejudice was seldom belligerent. The bigots were always in the minority in every community, and only when they happened to have financial or political prestige did they succeed in gathering a number of residents to their standards and thus deny the priest a place in which to preach.<sup>16</sup>

More often than not, the Protestant community welcomed the Catholic missionary. Frequently, the use of the local Baptist or Methodist church was volunteered to him. The ministers themselves would occasionally attend and show a "great deal of interest."<sup>17</sup> On reading Father Bresnahan's account of his gracious reception during 1908 in such places as Osteen, where only one Catholic was known to reside, it is difficult to understand how Florida, only eight years later, could select its governor largely on the basis of his anti-Catholicism. The good people of Osteen offered the missionary the use of their Methodist church, and as Father Bresnahan recalled: "They were delighted, too, when I requested their choir to assist me. Night after night I called out the number of hymns . . . and we all joined in singing as best we could such hymns as . . . 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. I do not think that any one in town missed the mission; and oh! didn't they ask some interesting questions! The attendance and attention were simply wonderful. On the farewell day I was earnestly begged to come back again very soon."<sup>18</sup>

14. Patrick J. Bresnahan, *Seeing Florida With a Priest* (Zephyrhills, 1937), *passim*.

15. *Ibid.*, 20.

16. *Ibid.*, 22.

17. *Ibid.*, 28.

18. *Ibid.*, 50-51.

After 1910, however, the rural population's attitude toward the Catholic Church was being changed by such publications as *The Menace* and *Watson's Jeffersonian Magazine*. To the simple country people of Florida, most of whom had never laid eyes on a priest or a nun, Roman Catholicism, as it was portrayed by the masters of vilification, seemed a weird and sinister thing. Little wonder they were "agin it." During the 1915 session of the Florida legislature, a body that was predominantly rural, a so-called "garb bill" was proposed, the alleged purpose of which was to regulate the "garb or dress to be worn by teachers in the public schools, while performing their duties as such teachers."<sup>19</sup> The real purpose of the proposed legislation, however, was not lost on the Sisters of St. Joseph; they quietly arranged that their three schools at St. Augustine and nearby Elkton and Loretto no longer be considered or supported as public schools.<sup>20</sup>

At the very time that the anti-Catholic forces in Florida were becoming strong and coordinated, the Church herself, in 1914, gained a strong leader in the person of Michael J. Curley. Seven years later, on his promotion to the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Curley would leave behind him a diocese and a state that bore the distinctive impress of his courage and leadership. Born in Athlone, Ireland, on October 12, 1879, Michael J. Curley began his studies for the priesthood at Mungret College, Limerick, and completed them at the Collegio Propaganda, Rome, in which city he was ordained for the Diocese of St. Augustine on March 19, 1904. Upon his arrival in Florida later that year, Father Curley was assigned to be pastor of the large missionary parish of St. Peter's, DeLand. From there, on April 3, 1914, at the age of thirty-four, he was appointed bishop of his own Diocese of St. Augustine.<sup>21</sup> Seven years later, on August 10, 1921, he was promoted to succeed the late James Cardinal Gibbons as Archbishop of Baltimore. On June 22, 1939, he also became archbishop of the newly created see of Washington, and thereafter

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19. House Bill No. 325 (introduced by W. J. Gray of Gadsden County) *Florida House Journal* (1915), 316, 389.
  20. Sr. M. Alberta, "A Study of the Schools Conducted by the Sisters of St. Joseph," 41-42. Contrary to the above writer's assertion, this bill was not enacted into state law.
  21. Before the creation of the Diocese of Miami, August 13, 1958, all of Florida, except the area west of the Apalachicola River, was embraced by the Diocese of St. Augustine, which had been established on March 11, 1870.



until his death on May 16, 1947, Curley had the rare distinction of ruling concurrently over two archdioceses.

If there was any one feature that distinguished the character of Michael J. Curley one might say it was his courage. As the *Catholic Review* of Baltimore wrote after his death: "By temperament he was a leader of battle, and love of truth gave rise to a zest for battle, whenever he saw that the cause of truth was at stake."<sup>22</sup> The prelate, who on several occasions did not hesitate to condemn the policy of the federal government towards the revolutionary forces in Mexico, who in the 1930s castigated the radical and ultra-liberal advocates of the anti-France forces in Spain, had earlier battled courageously and successfully the forces of religious bigotry in Florida.

From the beginning of his episcopal career, Bishop Curley expressed alarm at the growing menace of anti-Catholic literature. In a letter written to all pastors of his Florida diocese on January 28, 1915, he stated: "We Catholics of the United States are victims of organized vilification and the government itself [through the mails] takes a hand by the distribution of lewd and lascivious anti-Catholic filth. It is high time for the sixteen million Catholics of the United States to assert their rights and claim that protection which their citizenship and demonstrated loyalty should guarantee them." He went on to ask all pastors to call a special meeting of their people in each parish for the purpose of sending to their respective senators and congressmen a formal resolution of protest against the use of the mails for such purposes.<sup>23</sup>

On the occasion of a public reception tendered him in Jacksonville in the spring of 1915, the newly consecrated bishop took the opportunity to defend the patriotism of Catholics. "Patriotism of the highest order," he assured his mixed Catholic-Protestant audience, "flows from the very essence of Catholicism." No man who had ever read American history, he added, unless he were blinded by prejudice, could ever "stultify himself before public opinion . . . by stating that America ever had in the Catholic Church other than a friend. . . ." Yet the people were being told that because a Catholic policeman was on the force or in the city council, the country was on the verge of ruin. "Today that

22. *Catholic Review*, May 30, 1947.

23. Archives of the Diocese of St. Augustine, box 4 (x)-A-4. Cited hereafter as ADSA.

spirit is abroad, a wave of anti-Catholic hysteria is passing over the land. Men are organized to set citizen at citizen's throat." Curley went on to warn his audience: "If ever you make a man's religion a bar to public office, that moment you prove traitor to the greatest and most fundamental principle of our country's glorious constitution."<sup>24</sup>

Well known as a powerful orator, Curley always drew large crowds wherever he spoke. In July 1915, he again visited Jacksonville, the center of much anti-Catholic agitation, especially against the Knights of Columbus. Here he urged an overflow Catholic audience to band itself together in such societies as the Knights of Columbus to protect itself against "the hydra-headed monster of bigotry and prejudice which ever and anon rises up in this land of liberty."<sup>25</sup> In March of that same year, ex-Congressman Charles D. Haines of New York lectured in Tampa on the topic, "Whether . . . civic and religious liberty . . . is to continue in this nation, or is it to become only a chapter of past history, through the machinations of the Roman hierarchy?" Haines charged that Rome had its eyes on Florida and that the recent trip of Bishop Curley throughout the state had actually been planned at Rome and ordered from there. Every Knight of Columbus, he asserted, was a soldier of the pope, "an insidious influence for the destruction of your liberties," and like every good Catholic, "he votes for a Roman Catholic, regardless."<sup>26</sup> Curley lost little time in answering Haines. Addressing a specially called meeting after confirmation ceremonies in San Antonio, Florida, he assured Haines that he was in Tampa purely to discharge his episcopal duties and to administer the sacrament of confirmation. He went on to declare that he had nothing but contempt for the Catholic who would "vote for a Catholic candidate simply because he is a Catholic."<sup>27</sup>

The intensity of anti-Catholic feeling in Florida at this time may be gathered from an incident that occurred during the summer of 1915 in Fort Lauderdale. A young Catholic girl had been appointed by the Broward County school board to teach in the Fort Lauderdale public grade school. On the discovery that she

24. AD5A, 4-D-5; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, February 9, 1915.

25. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, July 29, 1915.

26. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, March 21, 1915.

27. *Ibid.*, March 28, 1915.

was a Catholic, the local school trustees refused to accept her appointment, and petitioned the school superintendent for her removal: "We are opposed to hiring and placing in charge of any of our school work any but Protestants."<sup>28</sup> Reaction to this move quickly came from Catholic and liberal forces in Miami, and Fort Lauderdale School Superintendent Robert E. Hall, in concert with local school trustees, shifted responsibility of the question to a mass convention of the people of the community. A Miami Catholic described the convention to Bishop Curley as "a quasi-lynching mob."<sup>29</sup> At this meeting, a Baptist minister and a Catholic layman both spoke up against the patent discrimination practiced against the teacher. The sentiment of the meeting, however, was indicated by the storm of applause that broke when a woman back in the crowd asked: "What I want to know is why we should have Catholic teachers when there are so many Protestants?" By a vote of 181 to seven, the citizens of Fort Lauderdale decided to back their local school trustees in rejecting the Catholic teacher.<sup>30</sup>

The *Miami Daily Metropolis*, leaving little doubt where its sympathies lay, editorialized: ". . . When 181 out of 188 citizens express their wishes not to have a teacher of the Roman Catholic faith in their school, it may be assumed that neither the teacher herself-or none of her fellow churchmen-would desire to have the situation."<sup>31</sup> The *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel* defended the action of its citizens: "Individually we have no prejudice against the Catholic, but we fear the power and influence of hierarchy. We know . . . that a Catholic's allegiance is first to his church and next to his state." The editorial went on to assure its readers that, "if any protestant church had a great organization behind it such as the Catholic Church has, we would feel toward it, just as we do the hierarchy."<sup>32</sup> The *Miami Herald* on the other hand was vehement in its denunciation of Fort Lauderdale's action. Believing that no appeal to fairness or loyalty would reach those who "displayed such narrowmindedness," the newspaper reflected

28. Copy of letter from taxpayers committee to public school official R. E. Hall, July 17, 1915, ADSA, 4-G-22.

29. James J. McLaughlin to Bishop Curley, August 25, 1915, ADSA, 4-H-12.

30. *Miami Daily Metropolis*, August 25, 1915.

31. *Ibid.*, August 27, 1915.

32. *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel*, quoted in the *Miami Herald*, August 29, 1915.

on the economic effects that such bigotry would have on Broward County, and, by association, on Dade County, both of which at that time were eagerly seeking new settlers: "No such blow to the welfare of the southeast coast of Florida has ever been dealt than that which those assembled at the mass meeting gave on Tuesday night."<sup>33</sup>

Of all the incidents involving Bishop Curley and the forces of bigotry, none attracted such widespread attention as the arrest on Easter Monday, 1916, of three Sisters of St. Joseph in St. Augustine. Three years previously, on June 7, 1913, the Florida legislature had passed a law making it unlawful for "white teachers to teach negroes in negro schools, and for negro teachers to teach in white schools."<sup>34</sup> William J. Kenny, Bishop of St. Augustine at the time, was advised by his attorney that the law was unconstitutional.<sup>35</sup> Deciding to await a "test case," Bishop Kenny had asked the Sisters of St. Joseph to continue teaching in their four colored schools at St. Augustine, Fernandina, Jacksonville, and Ybor City.<sup>36</sup> The test case came on the morning of April 24, 1916, when, on the orders of Florida Governor Park Trammell, the principal of St. Benedict's School for Negroes in St. Augustine, Sister Mary Thomasine, and two companion-teaching sisters were arrested and charged with the violation of the 1913 law. Two of the sisters were released under their own recognizance, but Sister Thomasine would not accept her liberty under this ruling, and refused to pay a bond of twenty-five dollars. As a result, she was imprisoned in her convent. Father John O'Brien, rector of the Cathedral, assumed the responsibility of her custody and appearance in court when her case should come up.<sup>37</sup>

On May 20, upon a writ of habeas corpus, Judge Cooper Gibbs, circuit court judge for St. Johns County, ordered Sister Thomasine set free on the grounds that section I, chapter 6490, *Laws of Florida, 1913*, did not apply to private schools. In his accompanying opinion, Judge Gibbs reasoned that just as a white doctor has the right to sell his services to Negro patients, so a white

33. *Miami Herald*, August 26, 29, 1915.

34. *Laws of Florida (1913)*, 311.

35. Alston Cockrell to William J. Kenny, September 3, 1913, ADSA, 3-W-22.

36. Sr. M. Alberta, "A Study of the Schools Conducted by the Sisters of St. Joseph," 44.

37. *St. Augustine Evening Record*, April 24, 1916.

teacher has the right to teach Negro pupils. While the judge's decision was undoubtedly hailed as an enlightened one for that time, the closing statement of his opinion would grate discordantly on the ears of more recent jurists: "To say that such teaching [of Negro pupils by white teachers] would tend to promote social equality among races and thus be opposed to the good morals of the State is to insult the superior race and ignore the relative status of teacher and pupil."<sup>38</sup>

Curley viewed the sisters' arrest as an attack against the Church and especially against Catholic education. The dedication of a new Cathedral School in St. Augustine, at a time when the sisters' trial was pending, was the occasion of a spirited defense of the parochial school system by the youthful leader of the diocese: "Today a propaganda of deception is being carried on, and it is focusing all its engines of attack against the Catholic School. The parochial school, they assert, stands as a monument to Catholic enmity and antagonism towards the public school. The parochial school is un-American, they cry. If religion and morality are un-American, and destructive of free institutions, then indeed the parochial school is un-American. But George Washington thought differently." Having explained at length the Catholic philosophy of education, Bishop Curley went on to defend the role of the parochial schools as well as the patriotism of their students. The fervor of his discourse as well as the enthusiasm of his audience may be judged from the newspaper references to the frequent outbursts of applause that greeted the bishop's words.<sup>39</sup>

Such frank and vigorous defense of the Church not only won for Bishop Curley the undying loyalty and glowing admiration of his own flock, but it attracted notice in higher places. From the Apostolic Delegate in Washington, Archbishop Giovanni Bonzano, came these encouraging words: "I have followed with great interest the accounts in the newspapers of your fight against the enemies of our holy religion and am gratified by the results you have obtained. I offer you my hearty congratulations and

38. Docket No. 3, 97. Law No. 778, Circuit Court House of St. Augustine, Florida. Filed May 22, 1916. Recorded in Circuit Court Minute Book, 267.

39. *St. Augustine Evening Record*, May 1, 1916.

shall be pleased to see you on the occasion of your trip to the north next October.”<sup>40</sup>

Nowhere were the forces of bigotry so active or so productive of results as in the field of politics. Feelings ran high in Jacksonville in 1914 when United States Senator Nathan P. Bryan, a Methodist, recommended Peter Dignan, a Catholic, for the office of postmaster of that city. Billy Parker, a firebrand from Pennsylvania, was imported to Jacksonville to spearhead an anti-Catholic campaign. The Guardians of Liberty and other secret societies gained so many members and such influence they were able successfully to use the religious issue against Senator Bryan in his 1916 bid for re-election.<sup>41</sup>

It was obvious that much of the anti-Catholic prejudice was being aroused and exploited for monetary purposes. *The Menace* and a host of other hate periodicals were doing a booming business. Bishop Curley informed a St. Augustine audience that anti-Catholic sentiment was becoming so intensive and widespread that despite the pitifully small number of Catholics in Florida, “a stranger in the State today might be justified in concluding that Catholics form seventy-five per cent of the total population if he were to judge the strength of the Church from the organized bitter opposition and vilification that are carried on against it from one end of the state to the other.”<sup>42</sup>

With this background in mind, the reader can now be introduced to Sidney J. Catts, the central figure in what the *New York Times* called at the time “the stormiest political fight in the history of Florida.”<sup>43</sup> Early in 1916, Catts stood as a rather lonely and forlorn figure on the outer rim of Florida politics. Utterly inexperienced in statecraft, he had never held a public office. As pastor of an obscure Baptist church in DeFuniak Springs, and a comparative new comer to Florida, he was all but unknown to the electorate of the state. During most of the primary campaign for governor, his candidacy was almost completely ignored. In fact, he himself was often jeered at, or treated as a joke. With practically all the newspapers and the powerful Democratic state

40. Giovanni Bonzano to Curley, August 25, 1916, ADSA, 4-K-19.

41. John R. Deal, Jr., “Sidney Johnston Catts, Stormy Petrel of Florida Politics” (unpublished Masters thesis, University of Florida, 1949), 33-34.

42. *St. Augustine Evening Record*, May 1, 1916.

43. *New York Times*, September 17, 1916.

machine and its local bosses arrayed against him, Catts, against hopeless odds, conducted a one-man campaign throughout the backwoods of Florida. That he overcame these seemingly insurmountable obstacles and became the only man in Florida history since Reconstruction to defeat the Democratic party's gubernatorial candidate stands as a monument both to his innate shrewdness and to the bigotry of his time.<sup>44</sup>

Catts was widely regarded as an oddity and as an ignoramus, but he was far from being either. He was rather a shrewd observer of the swelling tide of anti-Catholic prejudice. He quietly decided to make political profit out of this widespread sentiment. With consummate timing he made his entrance into Florida politics. Long before the gubernatorial primary elections, Catts began visiting the backwoods regions of Florida, where he played upon the fears and prejudices of the people. Apart from his denunciation of what he called the dictatorial method being used to enforce a 1913 Florida fish and oyster conservation act, Catts devoted his time and energy almost exclusively to the Catholic issue.<sup>45</sup> Combining invective with humor, Catts tiraded against the "papist church," which he denounced as a growing "menace" to the nation, to public education, and to good morals.<sup>46</sup> His program was put forward briefly as follows: "Nothing in Florida above the Nation's flag; the red school house against the Parochial school; all closed institutions in Florida to be opened by process of law and America for Americans first, last and forever."<sup>47</sup>

Early in 1916, the Florida Democratic Executive Committee, alarmed over the growing influence of the Guardians of Liberty and other similar secret societies, unwittingly played into the hands of Sidney Catts by passing the so-called Sturkie Resolutions, proposed by R. B. Sturkie of Pasco County where a large proportion of the population was Catholic. These denied voting qualifications in the primaries to those who would refuse to swear that they were not influenced by nor affiliated with such secret societies. It was now relatively easy for Catts to convince voters, many of whom had little interest in the religious issue, that their

44. Deal, "Sidney Johnston Catts," 1-2.

45. Cash, *Democratic Party in Florida*, 124.

46. Deal, "Sidney Johnston Catts," 52.

47. Pat Murphy, *Legislative Blue Book 1917* (Tallahassee, 1917), 62. Murphy was at that time one of Florida's best known lobbyists.

free political institutions were indeed being menaced by the Church of Rome.<sup>48</sup>

It should be emphasized, however, that most newspaper editors and responsible people, even in areas where Catholics were practically unknown, came out strongly against Catts' rabble-rousing anti-Catholic antics. The *Ocala Banner* lamented: "We confess that we were humiliated and mortified when this candidate to the highest office. . . , making the most vicious reference to the Catholic Church, should have received the wild applause, not of the rabble, but of supposedly good, cultured Christian women. Mr. Catts, in our judgment, is endeavoring to ride into the gubernatorial office of Florida by appealing to the religious passions of the ignorant and fanatical. It seems to us that he is a dangerous man."<sup>49</sup> The *Bradford County Telegraph*, denouncing the voices of bigotry, explained that numerically the "Catholic Church in Florida is a very weak affair," and that it was making "no effort whatever to exercise control over our state affairs."<sup>50</sup>

Catts' warm personality, together with his unique method of campaigning, were perhaps as important as the religious issue itself in accounting for his upset victory in the Democratic primaries of June 1916. His campaign tactics were unusual, not only because he concentrated on areas that the other candidates considered out of the way and insignificant, but also because he was among the first to introduce the use of a portable loudspeaker mounted on top of his Model-T Ford.<sup>51</sup> He boasted to an audience in Tallahassee that he had been in places where the voters were ignorant of the names of his opponents; that he slept in the beds "used by crackers and bedbugs;" that he had stopped to plough with the country folk, and noticing that they wore no shoes also went barefoot; and that he had kissed their clean babies and patted the others. He became all things to all men to such an extent that whenever he addressed an intelligent urban audience he omitted his usual tirades against the Catholic Church.<sup>52</sup>

Catts' narrow primary victory was disputed in court by his nearest rival, William V. Knott of Tallahassee. After re-counts

48. Cash, *Democratic Party in Florida*, 127.

49. *Ocala Banner*, May 12, 1916.

50. *Bradford County Telegraph*, May 26, 1916.

51. Deal, "Sidney Johnston Catts," 40.

52. Bresnahan, *Seeing Florida With a Priest*, 73-74.



had been made in several counties, Knott was declared the winner and the Democratic nominee for governor. The undaunted Catts would not give up without a fight. Gaining a place on the general election ballot as the nominee of the rather insignificant Prohibition Party, he faced formidable odds, but he had the psychological advantage of being "the people's choice" over Knott who was commonly referred to as the "court's nominee." By the time of the November election, the people were by and large convinced that the Democratic nomination had been stolen from Catts.

Up to election day itself Catts carried his crusade with unrelenting vigor against the Roman Church, which he termed the greatest menace that the country had ever known. He continually charged that his opponent, like himself a Baptist, was receiving campaign funds from Roman Catholics through Cardinal Gibbons.<sup>53</sup> Unlike the result of the primaries, the November elections left no doubt as to who had won. Sidney J. Catts, the Baptist preacher, had successfully exploited religious prejudice to become governor of Florida. Yet it should not be readily assumed that he was a rabid anti-Catholic bigot. Probably his true inner motive was revealed in a chance encounter with Father P. J. Bresnahan the morning after his primary victory. In reply to the priest's charge of spreading falsehoods about Catholics, Catts replied: "But, brother, it was all politics. Didn't [Napoleon B.] Broward tell the people during his Campaign [of 1904] that he would drain the Everglades and give them land for nothing if they elected him; and he was elected on that issue."<sup>54</sup>

Those who had expected Governor Catts to harass the Catholic Church after his election were for the most part disappointed; his bark was worse than his bite. Yet there were occasions when he lived up to his reputation and fulfilled at least some of his campaign promises with regard to the Church. The most notable demonstration of anti-Catholic feeling that occurred during his term of office was the enactment in 1917 of what came to be known popularly as the "convent inspection law." As might have been expected, Bishop Curley reacted strongly when this bill was proposed, calling it "this implied and outrageous insult to women who rank with the best, purest and noblest on God's earth." In

53. Cash, *Democratic Party in Florida*, 129; *Bradford County Telegraph*, September 1, 1916.

54. Bresnahan, *Seeing Florida With a Priest*, 74.

a letter to Speaker of the House Cary A. Hardee, he described the legislation as a "veritable crime." The bishop tried to disarm the proponents of the bill: "I state here and now that there is no such thing in this State as a Catholic institution that is closed to Florida laws, or to anyone representing lawful authority. Nay, more-every Convent in this state is open to every man, woman, and child residing in any town or city where such an institution is located, and I hereby invite any representative or body of representatives to go through any Catholic school or convent-when-ever they desire to honor us with such a visit."<sup>55</sup>

Notwithstanding this forceful note of protest, the bill was passed. It provided for the appointment by the governor of a commission of six members in each county. It was the duty of this body to visit at least once a year "All Hospitals . . . Public and Private Schools and Institutions, Nunneries and Houses of the Good Shepherd" for the purpose of "ascertaining the treatment of the inmates of said institutions and the general conditions."<sup>56</sup> These inspecting bodies were to be appointed in each county upon the recommendation of the board of county commissioners, but the law was never enforced.<sup>57</sup> It was finally repealed in 1935.<sup>58</sup>

Soon after Governor Catts' inauguration, the Guardians of Liberty began agitating for the removal of the Benedictine Sisters as public school teachers in San Antonio, Florida. Although the school building belonged to the Church, the sisters were paid as public school teachers and many non-Catholics attended.<sup>59</sup> The matter came to a head in September 1918, when the sisters were denied their salaries from public funds. Bishop Curley immediately directed that the building be used as a parochial school, and wrote a forceful letter to the people of San Antonio, with the result that not one Catholic pupil transferred from the school even though it was no longer supported by public funds.<sup>60</sup>

55. Quoted in Vincent de Paul Fitzpatrick, *Life of Archbishop Curley* (Baltimore, 1929), 32-33. This was a popular work written to commemorate Archbishop Curley's silver sacerdotal jubilee.

56. *Laws of Florida* (1917), 239-40.

57. Francis Sadlier, O.S.B., "The Catholic Church in Florida," Ellwood C. Nance, (ed.), *The East Coast of Florida: A History, 1500-1961*, 3 vols. (Delray Beach, 1962), II, 443.

58. *Laws of Florida* (1935), 647.

59. Mother Rose Marie, O.S.B. to Curley, August 9, 1917, ADSA, 4-M-26.

60. Father Albert, O.S.B to Curley, September 12, 1918, ADSA, 4-N-19.

By this time, however, the fervor of religious bigotry was waning in the South and throughout the nation. The ravages of World War I and its accompanying economic upswing diverted the people's interest elsewhere. Anti-Germanism replaced anti-Catholicism. On the completion of his four-year term as governor in 1920, Sidney Catts ran for the United States Senate. Carrying only three counties, he experienced one of the most devastating eclipses in political popularity ever suffered by a former Florida governor. For the scattered Catholics of Florida who had lived through this anti-Catholic nativism, it was reassuring to discover that the ugly tree of bigotry in the South had but shallow roots. Planted and nourished on ignorance rather than on malice, those roots in large part had their origin no earlier than the present century, and they seem now to have been extirpated.