Isaac Thomas Hecker Biography

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Biography

Isaac Thomas Hecker (18 December 1819-22 December 1888), priest, author, and editor, was born and grew up in New York City, the son of German immigrants. The most important event for the ultimate direction of Hecker's life occurred in 1841 when he met Orestes A. Brownson. It was Brownson who suggested in January 1843 that Hecker join the Brook Farm community. Dissatisfaction with the spiritual life at Brook Farm led Hecker to Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands for a brief stay, and finally to return to New York in August 1843. Once again through the influence of Brownson, Hecker decided to convert to Catholicism and attempted also to convert Thoreau and George William Curtis. He was baptized in August 1844 and travelled to Europe to study for the priesthood. In 1849 Hecker was ordained in the Redemptorist order. He was dismissed from that order in 1857 through a misunderstanding with his superior concerning permission to travel, and the next year was returned to the United States to found his own order, The Missionary Priests of St. Paul the Apostle (the Paulist Fathers). Hecker spent the rest of his life proselytizing for the Catholic Church in America, and attempting to further his own ideas about the essentially democratic nature of Catholicism. He died in New York City. Hecker's two books mirror his desire to make Catholicism a logical alternative for American Protestants: *Questions of the Soul* (New York: Appleton, 1852) is in part an autobiography which seeks to answer the questions raised by Hecker's own life, but is largely a definition of man's nature and an argument for Catholicism as the only religion which can fulfill man's spiritual needs; *Aspirations of Nature* (New York: J. B. Kirker, 1857) presents Catholicism as the religious instrument through which man can best direct his reason and will. Hecker's championing of the Catholic press in America resulted in his founding the *Catholic World* in 1865 and the *Young Catholic* in 1870, as well as his organization of the Catholic Publication Society in 1866.