John England Biography

John England

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Biography

The Irish churchman John England (1786-1842) was a controversial figure in Ireland and America. The first Roman Catholic bishop of Charleston, South Carolina, he founded the first American Catholic newspaper.

Born in Cork on Sept. 23, 1786, John England was educated in a Protestant school, where he was ridiculed as the only "papist." He trained for the priesthood at the College of St. Patrick. Ordained at Cork in 1808, he served there until 1817. His labors as chaplain, educator, preacher, and writer earned favorable attention, but his political agitation displeased leaders of both Church and state. Finally, in what seemed an attempt to get him out of the way, he was appointed bishop of the new diocese of Charleston, S. C.

Arriving in America in 1820, England discovered among the disorganized flock of Catholics spread throughout the Carolinas and Georgia a strong element of "trusteeism"--that is, laymen preferred to select their own priests. He proposed to correct this by creating a democratic constitution for the diocese that would provide for conventions of priests and laity but abolish parish trustees. Though his people accepted this compromise, it was viewed unfavorably by northern bishops. In Philadelphia and New York, England attracted Irish Catholic loyalties; this was regarded by local bishops as meddling and increased England's unpopularity with the hierarchy.

During 1822 England created a seminary, where he did much of the training of priests himself. He also started publishing the *United States Catholic Miscellany* (1822-1861), the first distinctly Catholic paper in America, which sought to defend the faith against outside attacks, explain Catholic doctrine, and convey internal Church news. It stands as his greatest achievement, even though episcopal jealousies kept it from becoming a national journal.

Through the *Miscellany* and his numerous controversies, and as a preacher and speaker, England became nationally famous. In 1826, as the first Catholic to address a joint session of the U.S. Congress, he spoke for 2 hours on Catholic beliefs. Yet his anticipated appointment to a more prestigious diocese never materialized. Meanwhile, partly because of his extended absences from the diocese, his constituency failed to enlarge. A steady burden of debts and growing fatigue led to prolonged illness; he died on April 11, 1842.