Seed/Harvest: A History of the Archdiocese of Dubuque/Archdiocese of Dubuque, 1837-2012: Jesus Alive Through 175 Years

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If one doubts the transformation of the institutional American Roman Catholic Church in the past 25 years from Vatican II–style community to reassertion of hierarchy, one need only set side by side these two volumes about the Archdiocese of Dubuque on the occasions of its 150th and 175th anniversaries. It is not just the starkness of the Seed/Harvest volume contrasted with the lavish, slick, coffee table look of Archdiocese of Dubuque. Nor that the former was published and printed in Dubuque and the latter published in France and printed in China. The key is in the fine print on the last page of the latter book, where the first six chapters are acknowledged as an “edited” version of the former book.

To discover the extent of the editing, compare Sister Jane Coogan’s original take on Archbishop John Hennessy with the bowdlerized version. Sister Coogan wrote,

Many AMERICAN bishops have had their roots in Ireland. . . . These were men who found themselves at home in the New World, who saw its needs and problems. . . . Then there have been IRISH bishops. . . . These took as their role model the bishops of Ireland, and patterned their American years on them. Fortunately, their numbers are few. . . . What are the earmarks of IRISH bishops . . . in America? Usually they were educated on the continent and well beyond the education level of the people they served; they led lives apart and aloof from those people and from the less-advantaged clergy. Their word was law, and diocesan matters solely their affair. . . . In any case, the career of John Hennessy shows many characteristics of the IRISH bishop ordained for America, in contrast to the AMERICAN bishop with roots, like his, deeply embedded in the old sod.

And here is the edited version:


The career of John Hennessy shares many of the characteristics of the type.

If we read only the latter version, we might wonder what that type is. The contrast Coogan made between American-born Irish bishops who
understood the American culture of equality and Irish-born bishops with no such sensitivity has been airbrushed, as has her critique of the first archbishop. The removal is all the more astonishing because other authors are allowed their critiques of archbishops. David Salvaterra makes a judicious contrast between the two Archbishop Keanes, one deeply immersed in the “Americanist” heresy of finding value in American democracy, and the other charting a course away from worldly snares. William Wilkie baits us with: “The new archbishop [Francis Beckman], like a classic tragic hero, had a fatal flaw that in the end was his undoing.”

Seed/Harvest also contains an admirable chapter by Thomas Auge, the dean of Dubuque historians, on Mathias Loras, and subsequent chapters that seemed unsubversive to the irrendentist project. Neither volume acknowledges the novels of Robert Byrne (as Garry Wills does lefthandedly in Bare Ruined Choirs), or even Mathias Hoffman’s historical novel Young and Fair Is Iowa or the missionary work of Ron Hennessey in Guatemala. Even when critical, both books are more about the archbishops than the archdiocese; they are primarily top-down history with some nods to social history.

Valuable information does appear in an update chapter, “Three Decades of Benedictine Leadership,” in Archdiocese of Dubuque, and it also includes summaries of local parishes and religious orders and organizations not covered by Seed/Harvest. I had not realized, for example, that Guatemalan Nobel Prize winner Rigoberto Minchu was present in Postville in protest following the 2008 INS raid. For those looking for current history, or whose coffee table is bare, Archdiocese of Dubuque will do. For a reliable history of the archdiocese, without having to check for expurgations, Seed/Harvest should remain on the bookshelf.


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Published for the first time, this collection of 39 maps of the Missouri River from the mouth of the Gasconade River in Missouri to Fort Pierre in present-day South Dakota offers the viewer some of the earliest recorded visual depictions of the region. Printed at 85 percent of their