



Ambition and Arrogance: Cardinal William O'Connell of Boston and the American Catholic Church

Douglas J. Slawson

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Based on a vast array of archival holdings, including the secret archives of the Vatican, this colorful and fascinating story recounts Cardinal William Henry O'Connell's ambitious grasp for power and his arrogant misuse of the trappings of the office. Appointed in 1895 to a minor post in the Catholic church in Rome, Father William O'Connell of Boston built a Vatican power base that made him a bishop, archbishop, and cardinal. His arrogant exploitation of his position drew the wrath of U.S. bishops—who were twice unsuccessful in having him removed from office. Believing that his high position exempted him from the rules of morality, O'Connell was utterly unscrupulous. He discovered multiple ways to turn a profit from his position and by 1923 had amassed a fortune. O'Connell brought further scandal upon his position when he turned a blind eye to the secret marriages of two priests who lived with him, one of them his nephew. When the marriages were discovered, the cardinal brazenly defended his nephew at the expense of the other offender. Had the Cardinal not worn the scarlet that marked him as a prince of the church, he may have gone to the grave a disgraced clergyman. However, his rank, his ability to maintain appearances, and his potent Vatican allies saved him from such a fate. This story serves as a mirror against which to view current affairs in both the Catholic church and the United States.

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