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Blast From the Past: Baltimore's O'Neill Legacy

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 19, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The worst thing about reaching fifty is the recognition that I must write out a will. I am not wealthy but I have collected a few nice things. I would like my library to go to a graduating seminarian at Catholic University to be chosen by the rector of the seminary and the Dean of the School of Religion. I hope someone wonderful is around to take my wonderful dogs. I wish one of my nieces had taken up the piano so I would have someone to give my extraordinary 1920 Mason & Hamlin piano. Ezra, a friend with whom I used to work at Kramer?s and is the only person I will permit in the kitchen when I am working there, gets the copper pots I lugged back from Paris, one per trip. Etc. Whatever money and property is left will be split between my family and the Church. There will be no, repeat no, restrictions on the money left to the church. The reason: The O?Neill legacy.

When Thomas O?Neill died in 1918, he left an estate of $5 million in 1918 money. That is a huge sum. But, one of the specifications was that, apart from some money for Loyola College and some for a hospital, the bulk was to be reserved for the building of a new cathedral. Anyone who has been to Baltimore will know that they already had they most beautiful Cathedral in the country, designed by Benjamin Latrobe, a study in classical ecclesiastical architecture. My sentiments were shared by Archbishop Michael Curley. The following excerpt from Thomas Spalding?s ?The Premier See? tells the tale:

?To the surprise of many a new cathedral was not a part of the archbishop?s plans, the O?Neill legacy notwithstanding. ?We have an old Cathedral that a hundred million dollars could not rebuild,? he [Curley] told a reader of the Review in 1944. ?I [have often] stated that I would prefer to build a little four room school for Catholic Colored children.? When the question of using the O?Neill legacy to complete the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington was raised by Bishop John F. Noll in 1942, Curley wrote the hopeful prelate: ?The O?Neill will is bomb-proof from any and every quarter. I shot at it the biggest shells I could procure in 1921-1922.??

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