

## **WILLIAM HENRY ODENHEIMER**

### **Third Bishop of New Jersey**

William Henry Odenheimer was born on the 11th of August 1817, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His father, John W. Odenheimer, was a prosperous merchant of Philadelphia who, with his wife Henrietta Burns Odenheimer, retired to Burlington, New Jersey, where both eventually died; she on September 5, 1866, and he on July 4, 1876. William had two younger siblings: John Kerlin, born September 24, 1819, and died November 14, 1821; and Caroline Louisa, born July 17, 1821, and died January 14, 1825.

Odenheimer was named for an uncle, a lieutenant in the United States Navy, who lost his life in an attempt to rescue a steward who had fallen off his ship the *Franklin*. It is not known if the steward was saved but a severe cold, caught in the attempted rescue, cost the life of William Henry in the year 1815 at the age of 23.

William received preparatory instruction at St. Paul's College in Flushing, New York, and then attended the University of Pennsylvania where, although he was less than eighteen years of age, he was selected to give the valedictorian address. He then attended the General Theological Seminary in New York City, graduating in June 1838. Bishop Henry U. Onderdonk of the Diocese of Pennsylvania ordained him deacon on September 2, 1838, at which time Odenheimer became assistant rector of St. Peter's, Philadelphia, where he had been assisting the rector, the Reverend William Heathcote DeLancey. DeLancey soon accepted the episcopate of Western New York and the vestry chose Odenheimer to be his successor, waiting until his ordination to the priesthood on October 3, 1841, to elect him their rector.

In 1839, Odenheimer married Anne D. Randall Shaw, daughter of John R. Shaw, an officer in the United States Navy. Anne was a descendent, on her mother's side, of Judge Berrien, the first supreme judge of New Jersey. Judge Berrien was Mrs. Odenheimer's great-grandfather and was appointed to his judicial position by the Crown during colonial times. It was in his widow's home, near Princeton, it is reported, that General Washington wrote his farewell address to his army.

Very little is known of Odenheimer's wife and children although there appear to have been eleven children born to the couple, only two of whom reached maturity. Twins, Henrietta Burns and John William, lived thirteen months, dying on September 7th and August 31st in 1840; Anne Randall was born October 16, 1843; Montgomery Berrien lived five months, dying on June 13, 1844; Alice, born May 28, 1848, and died April 20, 1849; Francis Lawrence lived fifteen months, dying on December 31, 1850; Archibald Shaw died on Ash Wednesday, 1864, at the age of thirteen; Henrietta lived thirteen months, dying on July 13, 1854; and Margaret Montgomery Howison died on July 29, 1876. Sources differ on several death dates, listing Montgomery Berrien's as June 3, 1845 and Francis Lawrence's as December 3, 1850. All the infants were buried in St. Peter's Churchyard, Philadelphia. One authoritative source, a grave registry book of St. Peter's Church, reports that their bodies were disinterred when their father was elected Bishop of New Jersey and were placed in the graveyard of St. Mary's, Burlington, New Jersey, where the older children were later buried.

Odenheimer, like the Onderdonks, was a strong supporter of the Tractarian Movement and this interest was evidenced by the pen name he used in many of his earlier writings, *Diaconus Catholicus*. He lost little time in making St. Peter's reflect his beliefs, abandoning the direction taken under the venerable Bishop William White, former rector of the parish. While White had

only Morning Prayer each Sunday and no weekday services, Odenheimer inaugurated daily services, Holy Communion at all Sunday early services, and Holy Communion on the first and third Sundays at the late service. In addition, a brass cross was placed, for the first time, on the altar as were candles and soon a tower and steeple appeared on the west end of the church. The anti-Roman Catholic temper of the times led many to declare a preference for a weathervane to top the steeple rather than the cross, but a tied vestry vote on the subject allowed Odenheimer to cast the deciding vote in favor of the cross. This brought to an end the classification of parishioners and neighbors as either "cross" or "vane" adherents. Soon a ten foot high gilt cross could be seen from as far away as seven city blocks.

Odenheimer took the middle road in the bitter and sometimes violent conflict between Protestants and the Roman Catholics. His book, *The True Catholic No Romanist*, presented his views on the controversy, namely that the break with Rome in the sixteenth century did not result in the creation of a new Protestant sect but was, in reality, a continuation of the Church of the Apostles. St. Peter's survived the storm of anti-Catholic rioting in 1844 and Odenheimer continued to stand resolutely between the two extremes of Protestantism on the one hand and Roman Catholicism on the other.

On July 26, 1851, Odenheimer and his friend William Weir left for the Holy Land via Europe and Constantinople. They spent Christmas in Jerusalem and, from this experience, Odenheimer created a series of lectures contained in his book, *Jerusalem and its Vicinity*. The early 1850s saw the beginning of the decline of St. Peter's due, in large part, to the shift of population from the eastern area of the city to the western section. The city evolved from a walking populace to that of a commuting one as the horse-car was introduced and flourished. The houses of the wealthy were divided into flats where the poor soon were crowded together. Episcopalians moved away from St. Peter's and the communicant membership dropped, slowly at first and then more rapidly until, by the time Odenheimer was elected the Third Bishop of New Jersey, St. Peter's was nearly empty on Sundays.

During the decade of the 1850s the Odenheimers maintained a summer residence near his parents in Burlington, New Jersey, where they became friends of Bishop Doane and his family. William C. Doane, later to be Bishop of Albany, remembered Odenheimer's presence at Riverside, the Episcopal residence, as that of a most welcome guest. As a boy young Doane was struck with Odenheimer's "intensest realization of the priestly office," although this admiration gave way to intense dislike after Odenheimer's consecration. Bishop Doane summoned Odenheimer to his deathbed, where he asked him to preach his funeral sermon.

Odenheimer was elected Bishop of New Jersey on May 27, 1859, and was consecrated Third Bishop of New Jersey in St. Paul's Church, Richmond, Virginia, on October 13, 1859, during the session of the General Convention in that city. It was a moment rich in symbolism as the Rev. Robert B. Croes and the Rev. William C. Doane, sons of the only two previous bishops of New Jersey, presented Odenheimer for consecration.

Two traits, and the intense drive that fueled them, best illustrate his Episcopate: his visits to every congregation as often as possible, including visits to each one by the end of his first year as bishop; and his efforts to revive old and feeble parishes and missions. Odenheimer pushed himself mercilessly in the pursuit of the goal of frequent visitations and he gently fanned the spark of life in seemingly lifeless congregations into a steady and strong flame. These many tiny and weak congregations were the legacy of his predecessor's predilection for missionary

zeal with little or no follow-up support and it was these frail places that took so much of the bishop's time and energy. However, his robust body paid a dear price for such drive. In 1866, at a visitation in Holy Trinity, Roundabout, he fell and broke his left knee cap and, five years later, a similar fall broke his right knee cap. Although in constant, severe pain he insisted on standing where required to do so by the Prayer Book, climbing the pulpit stairs, and standing to preach.

Odenheimer was revered by many of his colleagues in the House of Bishops. Bishop Henry Whipple of Minnesota spoke of him as a devout thinker, a wise pastor, and a most instructive preacher. He recalled evenings at General Convention when the two of them, with others, would talk the whole night through. Bishop Daniel S. Tuttle of Missouri spoke glowingly of him as a man of power, learning, and independence; one who would sometimes stand alone against all the other bishops on some particular point.

Odenheimer's dedication to each congregation, strong or weak, saw them increase from 85 to 129 by 1874. In addition, the clergy increased from 98 to 152, communicants from 5,000 to 12,000, and the ratio of Episcopalians to residents from 1 in every 124 New Jerseyans in 1859 to 1 in 83 by 1874. The energy required to meet this growth increased the physical demands on a man whose health was barely adequate to the task. It was apparent that a division of the Diocese was in order and, with amazing speed, that division was finalized in May of 1874. Odenheimer chose to become the First Bishop of the Diocese of Northern New Jersey, later to be more simply known as the Diocese of Newark. His decision was influenced by the smaller geographical area of the new diocese (2008 square miles to New Jersey's 5506), the smaller number of congregations to visit (55 in Newark, 19 of which were in the Newark and Jersey City, to 72 in New Jersey), a better system of rail travel, and a chance to be at home for longer periods of time. All of these factors were appropriate in light of the weakness of his knees and the onset of the disease that was to prove fatal.

Shortly after his removal to the Northern Diocese in November of 1874 he was granted a leave of absence for six months due to failing health. He returned in 1875 greatly improved but that happy circumstance soon passed. Nevertheless, he was able to carry on his Episcopal duties with energy and courage. After a two-year residency in Newark he moved to Orange. While on a visit to Mendham for his health, he grew worse and was removed to Riverside, his old Episcopal residence, by then the home of his daughter and son-in-law. After lingering for longer than he or anyone else expected, William Henry Odenheimer, Third Bishop of New Jersey and First Bishop of Newark, died on August 14, 1879, in the twentieth year of his episcopate. He is buried in the Churchyard of St. Mary's, Burlington, with his wife Anne who followed him in death on June 30, 1890.

His published works include:

*The True Catholic No Romanist* (1843);  
*Thoughts on Immersion* (1843);  
*The Origin and Compilation of the Prayer Book* (1844);  
*Bishop White's Opinions* (1846);  
*The Young Churchman Catechized* (two parts, 1846, 1859);  
*The Private Prayer Book* (1851);  
*The Devout Churchman's Companion* (1853);  
*The Clergyman's Assistant in Reading the Liturgy* (1847);

*The Sacred Scriptures, the Inspired Record of the Glory of the Holy Trinity* (1862);  
*The Church's Power in Her Controversy with Anti-Christ* (1865);  
*Canon Law* (1868); and  
*Jerusalem and Its Vicinity* (1855).

He edited the celebrated treatise of Joachim Fortius Reingelbergius, *De Ratione Studii* (1847) and, in collaboration with Frederic M. Bird, published *Songs of the Spirit* in 1871. The essay on Canon Law was the first contribution on the subject of Church law published for the Episcopal Church in the United States. Several of Odenheimer's books are in the Archives of the Diocese of New Jersey.

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