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A Tale of Two Bishops

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In the years 1975-76, Catholics attending Mass anywhere in the state of Montana would have heard the priest pray for "Paul, our Pope, and Eldon, our Bishop." Apart from the fact that outside of Montana there has never been a Catholic bishop in the United States named Eldon, there was nothing surprising about this.

What was surprising, as the traveler moved from town to town, was the discovery that there are in fact two dioceses in the state of Montana and that at the time both of them had bishops named Eldon. To be precise, Eld*o*n Schuster was bishop of Great Falls, Eld*e*n Curtiss bishop of Helena. (Bishop Schuster retired in 1977.)

Two millennia pass. By some process-global warming, a new ice age, ozone depletion, over-population, a nuclear holocaust-most of the towns and cities of the United States are destroyed, and with them most of the libraries and archives. Helena and Great Falls are reduced to mere villages, gathering places for shepherds in the winter.

Missoula is now one of America's largest cities, and in the year 4002 its thriving Catholic archdiocese invites a distinguished scholar from the Catholic University of America to lecture there, a man steeped in ancient languages and church history. The official *preacis* of his talk best captures its import:

"Montana Catholics are justly proud of their very old and distinguished ecclesiastical history, including the very full account they possess concerning the history of their church in previous millennia. The book, *The History of the Catholic Church in Montana*, written about the year 2300, is one of the fullest stories we have of early American church history.

"The reliability of that work is, unfortunately, increasingly questioned by scholars who have studied it carefully. One chapter in particular illustrates quite strikingly the necessity for skepticism-the report that, in the late twentieth century, there were two dioceses in the state of Montana, both of which had, at the same time, a bishop named Eldon, or Elden.

"From surviving birth and death records, tax rolls, telephone books, etc., scholars have ascertained that the name 'Eldon' was not a common one in the late twentieth century, 'Elden' even less so. Furthermore, by regional patterns it was much more likely to occur among Protestants than among Catholics. Fragmentary baptismal records of Catholic churches of the period reveal very few boys christened with either name.

"The likelihood that there would be two Catholic bishops named Eldo(e)n in neighboring dioceses at the same exact moment in history defies probability.

"No doubt there was a bishop named Eldo(e)n. There are fragments with that name and a small cross in front of it from the era in question, whose provenance was probably Montana. But scholars think that almost certainly there was only one such person, not two.

"The official history tells of a flourishing church in Montana which at some point found it desirable to split into two dioceses because of the great size of the state. Scholars now suspect, however, that in reality there was some kind of factional conflict or schism in Montana Catholicism in the late twentieth century, which produced two rival ecclesial communities-that of Helena and that of Great Falls.

"Bishop Eldo(e)n was probably the last bishop of a united Montana, valiantly holding the church together in the face of growing tensions. Because of this, both factions after the split claimed him as their own, the variant spelling of his name indicating different English dialects spoken in the two communities, a linguistic split itself probably indicating the ethnic division that was at the root of the conflict.

"It is important to remember that the *History of the Catholic Church in Montana* was written three centuries after the split occurred and that the author had to rely on various legends that had been passed down. These legends in turn had been created by the respective communities to explain their own pasts to themselves. Each needed the authority of the now-legendary Bishop Eldo(e)n, claiming to be his authentic spiritual descendants.

"Probably also in the late twentieth century, Helena had a bishop named Curtiss and Great Falls had a bishop named Schuster, most likely the first bishop of each community after the split. In time, as memories of the actual historical events faded, each community conflated Bishop Eldo(e)n with its own first leader-hence Bishop Eldon Schuster and Bishop Elden Curtiss. (The names give further clues as to the ethnic divisions that split the communities-Schuster has been found to indicate a Germanic identity, and Curtiss probable origins in the British Isles.)

"The author of the *HTCCIM* set down the truth as he had heard it, but he was not a critical scholar. His purpose was to preserve for the Catholics of Montana their stories about themselves, not to record objective history. Thus he perpetuated the myth of the amicable division of the state into two dioceses and the frankly preposterous story of the two bishops named Eldo(e)n."

As might have been expected, the lecture created quite a stir throughout the state of Montana, and some Catholics complained rather loudly that debunking "experts" should not be brought in to upset the faithful. But the whole episode was nicely put into context by an editorial in the Missoula archdiocesan newspaper:

"Montana Catholics are naturally disturbed at having some of their most cherished legends called into doubt. But we must remember that our faith is in no way dependant on the truth or falsity of such tales. They once served a pious purpose; they no longer do. Wisely, the archdiocese has decided for the time being to remove the marble plaque in the cathedral listing all the bishops of the state for three millennia, until a more careful investigation can be made into the accuracy of its claims.

"Rather than blaming the messenger who seems to bring us bad news, we should thank our distinguished visitor for sharing his insights with us, and we should rejoice that, once again, by their integrity, learning, and unbiased attention to the facts, scholars have shed needed light into a dark corner of the past."

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