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The Changing Character of the American Catholic Church 1810-1850

BY

KATHLEEN FLANAGAN, S.C.

As most school children have learned, "Columbus sailed the ocean blue in fourteen hundred and ninety-two," beginning the first European foothold in the New World. In 1565, the first settlement in the continental United States was made in Saint Augustine, Florida, forty two years before the settlement in Jamestown, Virginia. And in 1608, Samuel de Champlain established the first permanent French settlement in Quebec. These two settlements were attended to spiritually by Catholic missionaries and began the Roman Catholic presence in North America.

But as many, or perhaps some, Catholic school children also know, these settlements were not the beginning of the American Catholic Church. That honor goes to English lay colonists who helped to establish the first permanent colony in Maryland in 1634. The role of the clergy was much different in this colony. Since the public practice of Catholicism was forbidden in England at the time, Catholic clergy could only function in a clandestine manner, and obviously, the clergy were not supported by the state. Accompanying the original Catholic colonists on the ships *Ark* and *Dove* were two Jesuit priests and a Jesuit brother.¹ The first mass was celebrated on Saint Clement's Island, 25 March 1634. The Catholic colonists were always in the minority, and the priests functioned more as chaplains to the colonists than missionaries for the natives. But the holder of the proprietor's deed from the king was Cecil Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore, and he was a Catholic.

So this colony, though founded mainly as a commercial enterprise, nevertheless became a haven for Catholics. Catholics also found a friendly environment in William Penn's colony of Pennsylvania. Though legally proscribed in most other colonies, Catholics could be found scattered in the colonies of Virginia, New York, and New Jersey.

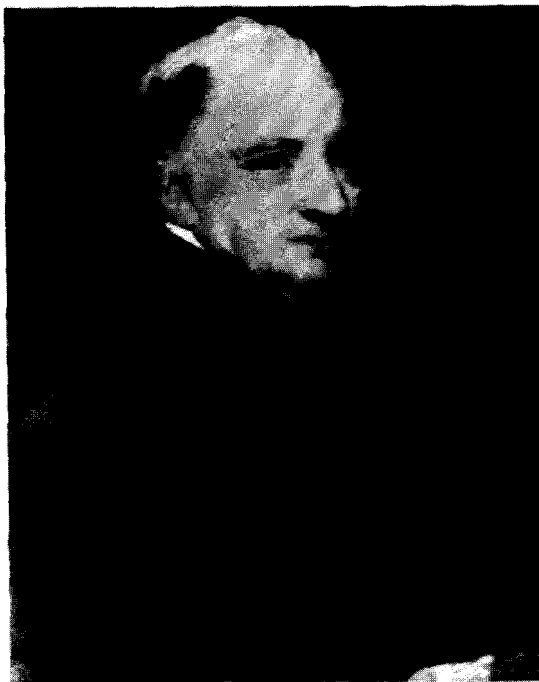
Independence from England and the establishment of a new republic brought legal relief for Catholics in the new United States. The

¹ Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 73.

beginnings of establishment of ordinary church structure was also a help. John Carroll became first Roman Catholic bishop in the United States of America in 1789. American born, Carroll had spent twenty-six years abroad as a member of the Jesuits, returning to his mother's farm at Rock Creek, Maryland, in 1774, the year after the Society was suppressed by Rome. Carroll was appointed Vicar Apostolic for the church in the United States in 1784, and in 1789 the local clergy elected him as the first bishop, which was confirmed by Rome. He served as spiritual leader of the American church until the time of his death in 1815. Carroll was well aware of the minority status of his co-religionists, and of the anti-Catholic prejudice of the majority of the American population. England was one of the European countries that had embraced the Protestant Reformation, and anti-Catholic feeling ran deep. This had been brought to the English colonies, and even after independence from the mother country, strong anti-Catholic prejudice prevailed.

Coming from a wealthy, well-respected Maryland family, Carroll was really a part of a small Catholic aristocracy. His cousin Charles Carroll, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was one of the wealthiest men in the new country. His younger brother Daniel signed the Constitution. John was a friend of Benjamin Franklin and was respected in political, social and religious circles. He was convinced that the new republic, with its guarantee of religious freedom for all, would be a boon for Catholics. And at least in his early years as bishop, he seemed to think that Roman Catholic ecclesiology could be adjusted nicely to the new environment. He defended the local election of the bishop, both because it was part of the history of the church, and because it was the most acceptable way for choosing a bishop in this new country where individual rights and responsibilities were so highly valued. He understood well that his co-religionists prized the ideals of the republic and if Catholicism was to thrive, it must function in a manner compatible with the political and social environment. His vision was also that the church would grow slowly and steadily in the new nation. An educated and economically independent laity, led by an educated and sophisticated clergy, would be the vehicle for acceptance by the larger American population. This vision for the future seemed feasible among a small Catholic population that numbered about 35,000 in 1790.² But this vision did not last much beyond Bishop Carroll's lifetime. Reasons for this included the fact that his immediate

² Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Experience* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1967), 67.



John Carroll (1735-1815). Born in Maryland, Carroll was appointed by Pope Pius VI to be the first Roman Catholic bishop in the United States in 1789.

Courtesy, Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, MD

successors, Leonard Neale and Ambrose Marechal, though well-accepted themselves in the milieu, were not really part of that Maryland aristocracy in the same fashion as Carroll. Nor did they have the vision that the first bishop had. But probably, more than any other reason, the shift from a slowly evolving native Catholic population was overwhelmed by the great waves of immigrants that began to enter the country after 1820.

According to Jay Dolan, there were ten ethnic groups that came to the shores between 1820-1920, swelling the ranks of the American Catholic population. If one compares the estimated immigrant population of 33.6 million during this period³ with the 1916 religious census of the Catholic population (15,721,815),⁴ one realizes that probably

³ Dolan, 129.

⁴ *Ibid*, 135.

a little less than half the total population growth of this period was made up of Roman Catholics (taking into account natural growth). Such numbers are staggering to comprehend, but give us some clue as to a reason that the majority population was fearful and hostile.

For the parameters of this study, we will only focus attention on the Irish and German immigration, with a nod to Mexicans. This is because the confines of this study are limited to 1810-1850. During the colonial period, Irish and Germans had immigrated to the English colonies. A significant number of Irish were Presbyterians, and they settled in several colonies, especially Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas. But there was a sizeable Irish Catholic population in Philadelphia, New York and in the colony of Maryland. Between 1820-1840, about 260,000 Irish immigrants came to the United States. With the beginning of the potato famine in the 1840s, however, immigration escalated, with more than one million Irish coming to this country between 1846-1851.⁵ Though more than three million more Irish would come by 1920, we will only note the population up to 1850.

Germans too came in great numbers. Between 1820-1860, about 1.5 million Germans came to the U.S. Most came for economic reasons; it was only after 1850 that religious persecution in the homeland drove other Germans to these shores. Estimates are that about 30% of these immigrants were Roman Catholic.⁶

The Irish tended to settle in the cities along the east coast of the country, and the Germans were concentrated in Pennsylvania and farther west, especially in those areas that came to be called the "German triangle" of Saint Louis-Milwaukee-Cincinnati.

Another way to look at the growth of the American Catholic Church is to look at the growth of dioceses. The Diocese of Baltimore was established in 1789, and comprised all of the United States of that time, from Georgia in the south, through Maine in the north, and all the way west to the Mississippi. Baltimore was made an archdiocese in 1808, with the dioceses of Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Bardstown (later Louisville) Kentucky as suffragan sees. In 1820 Richmond and Charleston were created as dioceses, in part to respond to the Trustee controversy. Cincinnati was established as a diocese in 1821, Saint Louis 1826, Mobile 1829, and Detroit in 1833. Vincennes (later Indianapolis) was established in 1834; Dubuque, Nashville and Natchez in 1837, and

⁵ Ibid, 128.

⁶ Ibid, 130.

Los Angeles in 1840. In 1843, Hartford, Milwaukee, Little Rock, Chicago and Pittsburgh were established. Portland, Oregon, was designated a diocese in 1846, Cleveland, Galveston/Houston, Buffalo and Albany were designated in 1847. By 1850, three more dioceses, that of Minneapolis/Saint Paul, Santa Fe, and Monterey were established.⁷ A mental image of the map of the United States gives some sense of the phenomenal growth of the Roman Catholic Church.

The bishops of these dioceses had their "hands full" trying to cope with the phenomenal growth. There was need to respond to people speaking a foreign language, German to be sure, but also Spanish, as significant numbers of Mexicans were added to the Church in the Southwest and in California in the 1840s and 1850s. Churches needed to be built to provide places of worship and of community for the immigrants. Networks of cooperation needed to be provided to help the immigrants find a home and get a job, care for the sick and those in need. Guidance had to be given to choose a school and to find ways to hand on the faith.

The bishops, pastors and people had many important problems to address. I shall focus on three: anti-Catholic prejudice, schools and caring for the sick and the orphans.

As noted above, anti-Catholic prejudice was as old as the English colonies. But Catholic loyalty during the colonial period, Catholic commitment to the new enterprise during the War of Independence, Catholic acceptance of the ideals of the republic, created a period of general harmony in the country that lasted for the first few decades of the 19th century. All of this collapsed with the wave of immigration after 1810, and a resurgence of anti-Catholic prejudice throughout the land. Often this phenomenon is referred to as nativism.

New anti-Catholic attitude and actions began to appear in the 1830's. In 1836, the *Awful disclosures of the Hôtel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* was published, supposedly reporting the immoral activities carried on in a convent in Montreal. Its supposed author, Maria Monk, even went on a speaking tour to major cities in the United States, recounting her horrific tales of the gross immorality of nuns and priests, including the

⁷ P.J. Kennedy & Sons, eds. *Official Catholic Directory* (New Providence, N.J.: P.J. & Sons, 1995), 420-429.

⁸ Reference to church burnings in Philadelphia and the fear experienced by local Sisters of Charity is found in Barbara Misner's book *Highly Respectable and Accomplished Ladies* (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1988), 9. Original reference is ASPCH. 7-10-2 early correspondence, #20, 21, 22. "Foundation," Three letters of Sister Mary Gonzaga Grace to Mother Etienne Hall. Saint Joseph Asylum in Philadelphia 8, 12, 17 May 1839.

tale of tunnels connecting convent and rectory. This book is the most famous example of the kind of literature that had been published during the 1830's and beyond. Stories such as these were believed by a majority of the population and became the occasion for mob attacks on convents and churches, especially the burning of the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts, in 1834 and the burning of churches in Philadelphia.⁸ Such attacks only subsided when responsible citizens were allowed to tour the convents (including Hôtel Dieu in Montreal) and see for themselves that there was nothing sinister present.

Other literature of the period, including *The Protestant*, a weekly newspaper first published in 1830, promised to unmask the corruptions of the papist system. A prospectus sent out before initial publication stated that the editors were looking for:

Narratives displaying the rise and progress of the Papacy; its spirit and character in former periods: its modern pretensions; and its present enterprising efforts to recover and extend its unholy dominion especially on the western continent A faithful exposé of the moral and religious conditions of Lower Canada, as debased by the prevalence of Roman Supremacy.⁹

Newspapers and journals such as these spread suspicions against Catholics. They spawned lecture series, with Catholic and Protestant clergy debating each other. Two Catholics who never feared to speak or write in defense of the Church were John Hughes of New York and John England of Charleston. Both used podium and pen to "de-bunk" anti-Catholic polemic and try to explain the true beliefs and practices of the Church. But the anti-Catholic literature of the period also inflamed the fears that there was some kind of papal plot to invade the western part of the country, beyond the Allegheny and Appalachian mountains and toward the Mississippi river. With strong French Canadian Catholic settlements in Canada, and Spanish Catholics in Mexico, the fear seems to have been that the pope would call for all Catholic people to unite and invade the West. Such rumors continued to the time of the Civil War, and may have flourished, in part, in the stream

⁹ From *New York Observer*, November 14, 1829, as quoted in Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860* (Chicago: Quadrangle Paperback, 1938), 54.

of German immigrants moving to the heartland in this same period.

Another issue that clergy and people had to cope with in this period was that of the schools. In order for this new republic to work it needed to have an educated electorate. Denominational schools had been established since colonial times but in the nineteenth century "common schools," or public schools, were begun, financed by public funds and governed by local and state boards.

It was thought that such schools could provide a foundation of learning for all pupils, regardless of ability to pay. Often ministers were the teachers in these schools. The curriculum included the "three R's," but also included reading from the Bible. Children's readers and history books were sometimes peppered with anti-Catholic writings, but it seems that Bible study became a great source of tension. This is because the Bible chosen was almost always the King James version. Catholic bishops were opposed not only to reading from that edition of the Bible, but were also concerned about the fact that such reading was not accompanied by proper explanation of the text. For Catholics, only the Douay-Rheims version of the Bible was considered acceptable. Beyond this, Catholic bishops and priests were insistent that the Bible must be interpreted and that this was the responsibility of the clergy. Protestants, on the other hand, often considered the King James version as the only version of the Bible, and a significant tenet of Protestantism was that the Holy Spirit guides each reader to understand the text correctly. The two views did not mix.

Unfortunately, when Catholic bishops rejected a particular version of the Bible, Protestants heard "no Bible at all." Where Catholics called for guided reading, Protestants heard another excuse for not becoming steeped in the Bible. This situation only increased anti-Catholic sentiment in many quarters. It also forced many bishops such as Hughes of New York and Purcell of Cincinnati to decide that the only solution was to build their own school system. It was when they asked for public funds to build these schools that new controversy developed, controversy not settled to this time.

Bishop Purcell carried an additional pressure in the building of parochial schools. He was situated in a diocese that was part of the "German triangle," and one of the ways that the Germans tried to maintain their cultural heritage was through schools where their history and language could be taught and the faith handed on. This was common thinking wherever there was a significant German population.

Although there was never unanimity among the bishops in the

early part of the 19th century, the building of a separate school system came to be more of the solution chosen by bishops, pastors and some laity for protecting the faith of the Catholic children, while at the same time finding a way to integrate these children into the larger society of the United States.

On a very different front, the bishops and pastors were also concerned with the care of the sick, the orphans, the mentally ill and anyone in great physical need. Such concern has been a hallmark of Christianity since its inception. This concern was institutionalized in medieval times with Benedictine monasteries having infirmaries attached, or the institutions staffed by the Knights Hospitalers of Saint John.¹⁰ In the 17th century the Daughters of Charity provided new models for the care of the sick, both in institutions and through home care. Thus the commitment to care for the sick was firmly planted in the Catholic psyche.

The Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph, founded by Elizabeth Seton in 1809, began by establishing a school in Saint Joseph's Valley in Emmitsburg. But even while Mother Seton lived, she sent sisters to begin orphanages in Philadelphia and in New York. Virulent epidemics periodically swept through the country, often taking parents and leaving children in need of care. Yellow fever and cholera were two common diseases of that period. In 1823 the Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburg were asked to staff an infirmary in Baltimore. As Christopher Kauffman writes:

. . . the sisters represented a new dimension in American health care, an explicitly Catholic culture in a pluralistic society. Because of its flexibility [the American rule of the Sisters of Charity] and the direction that the sisters consider the areas of poverty as their enclosure, the constitution adapted from the rule of the Daughters of Charity was particularly suited to American conditions.¹¹

Staffing infirmaries, alms houses and orphan asylums was a concrete way that the Sisters of Charity and many other religious communities of women and men responded to the health care needs of their fellow Catholics and others outside the faith. As Kauffman and others

¹⁰ Christopher J. Kauffman, *Ministry & Meaning* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 14.

¹¹ Kauffman, 34.

have documented, it was the courageous care given by the religious for all in need that helped to break the anti-Catholic prejudice so strong during this period. Whenever cholera or other disease swept a city or region the sisters were there to help and console. They did not ask about religion, race, or ability to pay. Their selfless actions went a long way to counteract prejudices long held.

We have focused on three areas that were a significant part of the story of a church and nation between 1810-1850. It must also be acknowledged that this was a time of great social ferment in society. It was a time of religious revival and social reform and of manifest destiny. During this time of massive social change, what sense of mission and ministry inspired the Sisters of Charity? What vision of mission and ministry guided the bishops? How did these visions intersect, and in what ways did they harmonize or clash?

The following presentations will continue the story.