

TRUTH, FREEDOM, TRADITION, FRONTIERS:
PRESENTATIONS ON AMERICAN CATHOLIC HISTORY
PART II: THE FAITH AND THE BEGINNINGS OF A NATION
THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN EARLY AMERICA

I. During the time just before the American Revolution, there was a great deal of religious diversity in the British American colonies. However, Catholics were still under disabilities, both because of historic prejudice and because of anger over allowing the mostly Catholic French to keep control of Canada and the area around the Mississippi River.

A. In the mid-18th century, the thirteen colonies were generally Protestant, but with a great deal of diversity regarding theology, liturgy, governance, and approach to the faith.

1. The Church of England was the established church in most of the colonies. However, the Congregational movement, which sprang from the Puritans and emphasized local control and simple services, was still dominant in most of New England. The Quakers were prominent in Pennsylvania, but still the minority. The Methodist Church, which was founded by John and Charles Wesley in the mid-18th century as a reform of Anglicanism, became very common especially with the preaching of George Whitfield. Presbyterianism, which began in Scotland as an extension of Calvinism, was also widely practiced, and often intermingled with Congregationalism. The Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church was still powerful in New York, which had at one time belonged to the Netherlands. The Amish and Mennonites, who sprang from the pacifist and simpler Anabaptist tradition, found homes in western Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia. With this diversity, and with Americans moving more often, people were more willing in the colonies than anywhere else to switch denominations, a tendency that continues to this day.

2. As of the 1760s, there were about 25,000 Catholics in the 13 colonies, about 1.5% of the population.

3. The First Great Awakening was a revival in the 1740s that led to a great increase in devotion and fervor throughout the colonies. Led by the likes of the Methodist preacher George Whitfield and the Puritan pastor Jonathan Edwards, there was a great emphasis on a personal experience of conversion and on the demands of the faith. But there were many opponents of this emphasis on individual conversion, intense emotions, and strict morality, as opposed to stable church governance, more formal prayer, and a willingness to deal with the world. This debate was sometimes phrased in terms of the “New Lights” who emphasized personal conversion and experience, and the “Old Lights” who preferred tradition and stability. That debate did not directly affect the Catholic Church in America, but it was still the background in which Catholics were practicing their faith.

4. There was also a debate over church governance. American colonists tended to want to run their own churches, without much oversight. Even Anglican parishes insisted on more control than would be the case in England, including letting the congregation decide who would be their pastors, and a willingness to critique them. Patrick Henry became famous during a trial over a vicar’s mandatory compensation,

in which he criticized the worldliness of the Anglican clergy. Catholics in colonial America tended to have more control over their parishes. And partially for that reason, most of them did not want a Catholic bishop in the colonies. Thus, for example, in 1765, about 250 Catholic laity and three priests sent a protest over rumors that the vicar apostolic of London planned to appoint a new bishop for the 13 colonies.

5. There were also differences among the colonists over their view of human nature. Initially, the Puritans and Presbyterians tended to emphasize human sinfulness, the need to for intense conversion experience and the sovereignty of God, and often downplayed human free will. However, over the course of time, the Methodist Church and revivalists generally tended to have a more optimistic view of human nature and free will, although they also emphasized conversion experiences.

6. Most colonists were Christian, but the Enlightenment had a large influence on intellectual life. Some people (e.g., Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson) had a positive view of religion, and approved of Christian morals, but were not themselves Christian. A few people, such as Thomas Paine, had a negative view of Christianity, but that was not common. Many Christians, such as George Washington, tried to find a way to present Christianity as consistent with the Enlightenment. The colonies did emphasize education, in part to help people read the Bible and in part to train pastors and evangelists. There were nine colleges founded in the colonies before the Revolution. Three of them were Anglican: William and Mary, King's College (now Columbia) and the College of Pennsylvania (now the University of Pennsylvania.) Three were Puritan colleges: New College (now Harvard), Collegiate School (now Yale) and Dartmouth. The three others were: College of New Jersey (now Princeton), founded by the Presbyterians; College of Rhode Island (now Brown University) founded by the Baptists; and Queen's College (now Rutgers), founded by the Dutch Reformed Church.

7. Views on how religious Americans were varied then as now. On the one hand, because people felt free to attend church or not, and to critique Church leadership and teachings, many people thought that Americans were very lax in their practice of the faith. On the other side of the coin, many people have argued that the practice of the faith was more sincere here than in Europe.

B. The diversity did lead the colonies to have more religious liberty than was available in most areas of the world. For if the colonies were to attract the immigrants they needed and to engage in trade with each other, they had to deal with each other's beliefs. However, except in Pennsylvania, this tolerance did not extend as much to Catholics. After the French and Indian War, part of the reason for suspicion of Catholics was ironically that the British let the mostly Catholic French still be dominant in Canada and along the Mississippi River.

1. When the British won the Seven Years' War (1756 -63), known in America as the French and Indian War, they acquired Canada and the area between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River (now the states of Alabama, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, Tennessee, and West Virginia.) Being most interested in trade and not wanting to have unnecessary trouble, they let the Catholics in Canada (mostly centered in Quebec) continue being the dominant group there and practice

their faith freely; they then extended the same policy to the French settlements along the Mississippi River. The British government also often found the colonies a convenient place for people who were did not fit into British life to go; and many people in Britain probably thought that Canada was a place for Catholics to emigrate to.

2. There was some question about what to do with the area between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. And so, for the time being, the British government forbade new settlements there.

3. Many colonists were very angry at these policies because they fully expected to have the right to settle that land. In fact that policy was one of the accusations against the King in the Declaration of Independence. And, because it was the mostly Catholic French who were on the land, or were seeking rights to it, many colonists took their anger out on Catholics.

4. In addition, many people (then as later) considered Catholics to be of suspect loyalty because of the connection another sovereign, i.e. the Pope, and to Catholic nations such as France generally.

II. Despite the discrimination against Catholicism, Catholics generally supported the American Revolution, largely based upon philosophic agreements with the Revolution and partially with the expectation that the new republic would respect their rights. Their hopes mostly turned out to be mostly correct.

A. The financier Charles Carroll and his cousins Daniel Carroll and Fr. John Carroll were prominent in supporting the Revolution.

1. They were grandsons of another Charles Carrol (the Charles the Settler), who had established the basis for a family that wealth and prestige through trade and financing. One of his sons, Charles Carroll of Annapolis, built upon his father's business and handed on a great estate to his children, including the eldest, known as Charles Carroll of Carrolton.

a. Born in 1737, Charles Carrol of Carrolton was largely educated in Flanders and France because Catholic schooling was not allowed in Maryland. As a Catholic, he was at first not allowed to hold public office in that colony. However, he defended the rights of the colonists and was the first to coin the phrase "no taxation without representation." His intelligent arguments gave him great prestige and eventually the Maryland legislature allowed him to take his place at the Second Continental Congress, where he was the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence.

b. During the Revolution, he helped secure Catholic France's support and gave his own financial assistance. He was also involved in the drafting of Maryland's new constitution, which removed religious disabilities.

c. In 1790. Charles Carrol asked for and received George Washington's assurance that the new republic would secure religious liberties,

d. He retired from politics in 1800, but remained active in business and as a living connection to the revolution. He died in 1832, the last living signer of the Declaration of Independence.

2. Another of Charles Carrol the Settler's sons was Daniel Carroll, who also built up great wealth. He in turn had six children, two of whom Daniel Carroll Jr. and John Carroll would be prominent in early America.

a. Daniel Carroll Jr. was a very prominent landowner in Maryland at the time of the Revolution. Despite the potential for financial ruin if the Revolution failed, Daniel Carroll Jr. supported the Revolution. And, in 1777, he was allowed to take a seat in the Maryland legislature, where he was very active in raising troops and financing for the Revolution. As the Revolution was coming to a successful conclusion in 1781, he was also prominent in drafting the Articles of Confederation, which governed the new country until 1789; and he was especially noted for promoting the agreement that all of the new states cede to the federal government rights to lands west of the Appalachian Mountains.

b. John Carroll (1735 – 1815) became a Jesuit priest in 1761, but was at the time stationed in Belgium. He returned to America in 1774 and founded a new parish in Maryland on property belonging to his family. In 1776, he joined the Continental Congress' mission to Canada to try to persuade the Canadians to join the revolutionary effort. Although the mission was unsuccessful, he gained great prestige among the revolutionaries. After the Revolution, he would become the first American Catholic bishop and would be the leading figure in the American Catholic Church in the early years of the republic.

B. The Catholic French government also gave absolutely critical assistance to the colonists.

1. Largely to diminish the power of the British Empire, the French government recognized the American colonies in 1778 and gave a great deal of financial help to them. In 1778, a French navy supported the colonialists in New York and Boston. And, starting in 1780, another French fleet assisted the colonists from bases in Newport, Rhode Island.

2. In 1781, the colonial army under George Washington was able to trap General George Cornwallis' army in Yorktown because a French fleet blocked English ships that were supposed to provide the British army an escape.

C. There were a number of Catholics in the colonial army, who provided invaluable service. Some examples include:

1. The Marquis de Lafayette was a French aristocrat and a brilliant officer. In 1777, at the age of 19, he joined the American effort and commanded colonial armies under Washington in several crucial battles, from Brandywine to Yorktown. Although he later joined the French Revolution, he was both Catholic and an idealist who supported the cause of republicanism.

2. Likewise, John Barry, a very devout Catholic, commanded several ships during the American Revolution and captured a number of British vessels; after the Revolution he became the first flag officer in the American navy.

3. Stephen Moylan was from a prominent Irish family. He came to Philadelphia and established a very successful shipping business in Philadelphia in 1765. He joined the colonial army in 1775 and became its first quartermaster general.

D. Overall, it is not clear how many of the enlisted soldiers were Catholics, but it appears that they were more than proportionate to the populations; some estimates are as high as 5 percent.

E. Theodore Maynard argued in The Story of American Catholicism that, while the Founding Fathers were generally Protestant or deists, there was a Catholic philosophical background to the American Revolution.

1. The Revolution had backing from such Enlightenment era figures as Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson. But it also had a strong evangelical religious strain as well, for it came on the heels of the First Great Awakening in the 1740s. The two sides joined forces for the time. The Declaration of Independence, and most of the Founding Fathers, premised the Revolution on the law of God and believed in His providential guidance. The Revolution was not specifically Christian, but most of its adherents were. Except Charles Carroll the Founding Fathers were not Catholic and did not accept Catholic philosophy directly. However, much of their philosophical arguments came from, or at least, had the support of, a Catholic background

2. Saint Thomas Aquinas had argued that it is permissible to overthrow governments (and even if necessary to kill monarchs) if they become tyrannical and if there are reasonable prospects for improvement by a new regime.

3. In 1215, it was the Catholic Archbishop Stephen Langdon who brokered the agreement between King John and the English nobles that would later become known as the Magna Carta. The founding fathers of the United States would trace many of their rights back to that document.

4. Saint Robert Bellarmine (1542 - 1621), now recognized as one of the 35 great "doctors of the Church," argued strongly that people establish governments to defend their rights and have the right to replace them if they do not. He said that, in different situations, people should choose between different forms of government depending on which one works best. The Protestant theologian Robert Filmer who worked under James I of England, argued most strongly for the divine right of kings, sharply critiquing St. Robert Bellarmine's views.

5. The mendicant orders, especially the Dominicans and Franciscans, were governed largely on democratic bases, with voting among the brothers and sisters. That was a radical concept at the time of their foundings in the thirteenth century. Likewise medieval guilds were often run on a democratic foundation.

6. Catholic theology strongly defended the notion of free will and the obligations of the rich and powerful to everyone else. Thus, for example, throughout the Middle Ages, church officials often admonished nobles to respect the rights of their people.

7. Due to religious disagreements, the colonists had to find a common ground in reason to justify the revolution. However, because many of the advocates of the Revolution based their support on religious grounds, it was also important to appeal to the religious convictions of many different people. It was necessary, therefore, to present a unity of faith and reason, which is a teaching of the Catholic Church.

F. Many Catholics, most prominently Charles Carroll, also expected that, if they supported the Revolution, the new Republic would respect their religious freedom. For the most part, their hopes were fulfilled.

1. Some of the Founding Fathers, such as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, strongly promoted religious pluralism, in part based on principle and in part to unite the different sections of the country. In addition, with the colonists seeking French help, it was essential to be at least somewhat friendly to Catholics.

2. During the Revolutionary War, the Virginia House of Burgesses passed the Statue of Religious Liberties giving all citizens equal religious freedom. It was an accomplishment Jefferson was especially proud of; for he had it inscribed on his gravestone as one of his three greatest accomplishments. Maryland also guaranteed religious liberty in its new constitution.

3. As part of the deal to join the new Constitution drafted in 1787, several states insisted that it would soon be amended to contain a Bill of Rights. That demand resulted in the first 10 amendments to the national Constitution. The First Amendment began by stating that the federal government must stay out of religion. Later, with the 14th Amendment in 1866, and subsequent Supreme Court decisions interpreting it, that provision was applied to states as well. However, even before that time, the states one by one removed religious disabilities.

4. There was still much discrimination against Catholics in many parts of this country, which at times flared up again. But, it gradually diminished over the long course of time.

5. This religious liberty could be based upon a positive foundation or upon a negative one. The positive idea was that, as expressed in the Virginia Statute on Religious Liberty, religion is both more sincere and stronger when it is free. The negative idea is that religious truths are either unimportant or unknowable, and thus that religious differences are irrelevant. Christianity in general, and Catholicism in particular, would try to take advantage of the positive side, while combatting the negative.

- As a practical matter, as Alexis de Touqueville observed in his 1832 book Democracy in America, Christianity did well in this nation. He wrote, "America is still the place where the Christian religion has kept the greatest real power over men's souls; and nothing better demonstrates how useful and

natural it is to man, since the country where it now has the widest sway is both the most enlightened and the freest.”

III. The American Catholic Church gradually expanded in the new republic, with the first dioceses and first schools taking shape.

A. In 1789, Pope Pius VI appointed John Carrol (a cousin of Charles Carrol of Carrollton) as the Bishop of Baltimore, and the first American bishop. Thinking that he needed government approval, the Pope wrote to President George Washington explaining the appointment and how it was good for America.

1. In 1784, Pope Pius VI had appointed John Carroll as the Prefect Apostolic of the American Church. For by then it had become clear that the new nation needed its own leadership; and the few priests who were here overwhelmingly showed their support for John Carrol. In addition, unless there was a bishop in the new colonies, seminarians had to travel to Britain, Ireland, or the Continent for ordination, a trip that could be dangerous and unpredictable.

2. The Catholic priests in the United States took a vote, and overwhelmingly they nominated Charles Carroll as the bishop of Baltimore, a nomination that Pope Pius VI soon approved of. Both before and after this election, John Carroll took up the role of increasing Catholic education and practice in the new country.

a. In 1785, he sent a report to the Vatican reporting on the condition of Catholicism in America. In that report, he said that there were 15,800 Catholics in Maryland, 7000 in Pennsylvania, and 1500 in New York, and a scattering of Catholics in the other states, including about 200 in Virginia. He also said that there were a certain number of Catholics in the area west of the Appalachian mountains, generally of French origin. The total number of Catholics in the colonies was still likely about 1.5 to 2% of the overall population. Bishop Carroll also reported that there were 19 Catholic priests in Maryland and 5 in Pennsylvania, some of whom would also minister to Catholics in other states. There were also other Catholic priests ministering in the western lands. He said that Catholics here were usually dutiful in their obligations, but lacked deep fervor of the faith.

b. When the Vatican agreed to appoint a bishop for the new country, it also allowed the clergy to vote for a nominee. In an open vote, they elected John Carroll, who ironically had opposed the idea of such an election.

c. John Carroll called a synod of the clergy in 1791 and issued a follow up pastoral letter. That synod and letter emphasized the need for a renewal of faithful practice and education among Catholics. There was a call to establish new schools and standardize the liturgy and catechesis. On the one hand, the pastoral letter, looked forward to the great opportunities that the new country was giving the Catholic Church. On the other hand, it expressed concern that Catholics neglecting their faith in order to get along with society.

d. Bishop Carroll and the church also addressed the advantages and challenges of a church that was not supported by the government. This

arrangement did lead, as it has throughout American history, to the laity being more involved in the Church. There was a reminder for people voluntarily to contribute to the church in a situation where contributions were not mandatory. There was also the issue of who runs the parish, the laity or the clergy, and the question of whether the people of a parish can select their own pastors. Bishop Carroll and the leadership of the church opposed full lay control, and even more the congregations' ability to hire and dismiss pastors. But the laity would take on more of a role in this nation than probably any other in the world.

B. With the new freedom offered in this country, the Catholic Church rapidly expanded her presence. In addition, immigration increased the numbers of Catholics in this country.

1. The Carmelites established the first women's religious house in the United States, with the Poor Clares establishing a house shortly thereafter. On the men's side, the Augustinians established a house in Philadelphia in 1796, and the Dominicans a priory in Kentucky in 1806.

2. Many priests and religious women (including the Carmelites and Poor Clares) fled the French Revolution, and some of them came to the United States for refuge. The clergy and religious brothers of the Catholic Church in America early on were thus heavily French in origin. Most of the Catholic laity were of English or Irish origin, but there were also many Catholics from France and Germany, including exiles from the French Revolution. The slave revolts in San Domingo (now the Dominican Republic), and the instability in the Caribbean generally, led some mostly Catholic families to come to the United States as well.

3. The Catholic Church began establishing many new schools and emphasizing education and catechesis more. By 1815, the Catholic Church in America established three new colleges, three seminaries, and several academies for the education of women. Bishop Carroll was also on the board of trustees of St. John's College in Annapolis and the University of Pennsylvania, both of which were by this time non-denominational institutions.

C. With the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory in 1803, vastly more lands opened up to the United States, and the American Catholic Church had to plan for expansion there as well. In 1793, the Vatican had established the Diocese of New Orleans to cover these sparsely populated territories, as well as Florida, both of which at the time were under Spanish control. In 1795, the new bishop Louis Cardenes wrote a letter back to the Vatican that described the lack of strong Catholic practices in that area. He was not particularly favorable to the presence of Protestants in the area, thinking that they led Catholics to be lax in their faith. He did praise the Catholic schools in New Orleans and the promotion of education generally, especially by the Ursuline sisters, who had come to the city in 1727.

D. In 1808, with the expanding Catholic population, the Vatican established four more dioceses in the United States: Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and Bardstown, Kentucky. By this time, there were 68 Catholic priests in the United States, with 52 of them still based in Maryland. The Catholic population was estimated at about 100,000, which was still at about 1.5% of the country's population.