

TRUTH, FREEDOM, TRADITION, FRONTIERS:  
PRESENTATIONS ON AMERICAN CATHOLIC HISTORY  
PART IV: THE FAITH AND THE GATHERING OF MANY PEOPLES INTO ONE  
THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN MID 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AMERICA

I. During the years leading up to the Civil War, the Catholic Church in America expanded substantially, but also faced hostility from nativist influences. The Church in America also debated how to incorporate the Romantic movement and national identity into her religious practices.

II. Due to immigration, natural growth, and the acquisition of new territories by the United States, the Catholic population here increased much more rapidly than the general population.

A. From 1830 to 1860, the Catholic population in America increased from about 300,000 to about 3.5 million, and the Catholic portion of the population increased from about 2.5% to about 12%.

B. From 1830 to 1866, the number of clergy in America grew from 232 to 2770 and the number of parishes and missions from 230 to 5067. The number of women religious grew, although less dramatically, from about 500 in 1830 to about 2000 in 1870.

C. The bishops began being more native born or Irish although the French still had a large role. Of the bishops appointed between 1830 and 1866, 31% were Irish born, 25% native born, 20% French born and 6% German born.

III. This growth was fueled in large part by immigration from European nations, who were experiencing various sorts of difficulties, and by the expansion of American territory..

A. Because of conflicts and famines in Europe and prosperity in America, immigration to the United States expanded dramatically after 1830. The number of new permanent residents to the United States increased from about 120,000 (about 1 % of the population) during the 1820s to 540,000 (3.2% of the population) in the 1830s to 1.4 million (about 6.2% of the population) during the 1840s to 2.8 million (about 9% of the population) in the 1850s. In the 1850s, about 36% if the immigrants were from Ireland, about 35% from Germany or related countries, about 16% from Britain, about 3% from France, and about 2% from Canada.

B. Due to the Irish potato famine (1845-49) and other economic and political crises, about 1.5 to 2 million Irish left that nation in the 1840s and 1850s. Many, and perhaps most, of them came to America. The result was both a dramatic increase in the number of American Catholics, and the increasing influence of the Irish on American Catholicism. By 1860, an estimated 63% of the 3.5 million American Catholics were from Irish or of Irish origin.

C. The revolutions and wars in Europe during the 1840s led many people, especially from the German nations to emigrate to other lands, particularly the United States. With its spacious land and opportunities to establish new settlements, the Midwest was especially attractive. By 1860, about 15 percent of American Catholics were of German

background. The area between Cincinnati, Saint Louis and Milwaukee was sometimes called “the German triangle.”

D. In the 1840s, the United States grew rapidly with the entrance of Texas into the union, the acquisition of the Southwest through the Mexican-American War, and the clarification of the Northwest through a treaty with Great Britain. Although not heavily populated with Mexicans and Spanish, Texas and the Southwest did bring some people of Mexican and Spanish descent, who were mostly Catholic, into the country. Those increases were the beginning of the heavy Latino influence on the American Catholic Church. The acquisitions also increased the call for the American Catholic Church to bring the Gospel to Indian populations.

E. The area around Louisiana still retained a heavy French influence, as did the areas around upstate New York and New England. And many of the French immigrants came to these areas, as well as areas around the Mississippi River.

IV. The expanding Catholic Church also established many new schools, religious houses and missionary efforts.

- A. More women religious orders were established or set up houses in the United States. Venerable Henriette Delilla established the Association of the Holy Family in New Orleans in the 1820s (with official approval in 1842) to care for the sick and poor and to provide catechesis. Saint Theodora Guerin brought the Sisters of Providence to establish schools and missionary work in Indiana in 1840. In 1845, Bishop Paul Lefevre of Detroit invited Mother Theresa Maxis Duchemin of the Sisters of Providence to establish the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary for the new schools that were rapidly developing. The French Canadian Sisters of Providence expanded into Washington States in 1856. Benedictine sisters set up a convent in St. Mary Pennsylvania in 1852. These religious sisters usually conducted activities in the world, but were more contemplative than most of the religious brothers.
- B. The issue of the lay role in the Church was still heavily debated. The bishops mostly had control over the Church properties, but as a practical matter the laity had more of a role in the United States than in most countries.
  1. Bishop John England of the Diocese of Charleston (which covered the Carolinas and Georgia) promoted a more democratic form of governance. And Archbishop Peter Kenrick of Saint Louis argued for more lay control over properties on the grounds that running properties was a distraction from his role as a bishop.
  2. By contrast, other bishops such as Bishop John Hughes of New York wanted a more centralized form of governance.
- C. The number of Catholic schools increased rapidly, along with the general focus in America on educational opportunities. For example, the number of schools for girls rose from 20 in 1830 to 130 in 1856. From 1830 to 1860, religious orders established 93 “colleges” for boys and young men aged 6 to 20 during the years before the Civil War. Many of them faltered for financial reasons, but about 29 are still in existence today.

- D. Starting in Charleston in 1820, Catholic diocese also started publishing their own newspapers to get the Catholic view out to both the faithful and the nation.
- E. The settlement of the frontier, including the original land west of the Appalachian Mountains, the Louisiana Purchase, and the new acquisitions opened up large amounts of land for missionary work. For example, from 1830 to 1870, Fr. Pierre de Smet brought over 100 Jesuit priest and associated missionaries to the frontiers, especially to present the faith to Indian peoples.

IV. Sadly, in response to the increasing Catholic presence, there was a nativist reaction against immigrants and against the Catholic Church.

A. The opposition came from several different directions. Many American nativists argued that Catholics were allied with a foreign power (the Pope), although the Pope never tried to influence American politics, and in fact was trying to defend his own Papal States. They also claimed that Catholic ideas of dogma contradicted American democracy, although the idea of fixed truths also guided the founding fathers. There were those who believed that the Catholic faith was outdated and contradicted the intellectual development of the modern world, ignoring the many Catholic intellectuals and scientists. There were also stereotypes that Catholics were superstitious and poorly educated, although the Church was rapidly developing a free school system for all people.

B. There were numerous individual and collective efforts against Catholicism.

1. Many rich and upper middle class American families hired young Irish women as housekeepers and governesses. There were books about how to “convert” these and other young Catholic women, whom the books generally referred to under the generic name Bridget.
2. Maria Monk’s 1836 book Awful Disclosures, which was a completely falsified account of a scandalous convent in Quebec, caused a sensation in Canada and America, although there was no evidence to back it up.
3. Samuel Morse, the inventor of the Morse Code, was vehemently anti-Catholic and in fact ran for Mayor of New York on the Nativist Party ticket in 1836. He was also very much pro-slavery on the grounds that God created different classes of race.
4. There were anti-Catholic riots in Philadelphia in 1844 and Louisville in 1855. After false allegations of imprisoning girls, an Ursuline convent in Boston was burned in 1834.

C. Overall, the public school system was heavily Protestant in its focus, which sometimes caused problems with Catholic students. For example, John Foxe’s 1583 Book of Martyrs, describing (sometimes factually, sometimes fictionally) Protestant martyrs under Catholic governments was particularly popular reading in schools.

D. The Know Nothing movement and party that developed in America in the 1840s and 1850s opposed immigration in general and the Catholic Church in particular. This group, which called itself the American party, were referred to as Know Nothings because, when asked about the group, members were supposed to say that they knew nothing.

E. The anti-Catholicism tended to be more dominant in cities. In the more frontier areas, both the newness of the settlements and the need to get along with each other tended to favor more interreligious cooperation.

V. The Catholic Church in America also tried to adapt elements of the increasing Romantic movement as a part of her theological and evangelical growth, but without taking on its more syncretic elements.

A. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, an intellectual and cultural movement often called Romanticism developed in the Western world. This philosophical, social and literary movement stressed the importance of nature, of intuition, of local and national identity, and of simple living, partially in reaction to the more rationalistic and impersonal aspects of the Enlightenment Era. In America, Romanticism largely took form in the Transcendentalist movement, whose most prominent members included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Louisa May Alcott, authors of essays such as “Nature,” such books as Walden Pond, and the novel Little Women respectively. The movement, came from diverse philosophies with intellectuals such as Immanuel Kant, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Edmund Burke among its founders. The Romantic movement had a great deal of influence on such authors as William Blake, Samuel Coleridge and Mary Shelly in Britain and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allen Poe, and Walt Whitman in the United States.

B. Although Romanticism and Transcendentalism were not particularly Christian in their background, this movement did serve as a counterweight to the Enlightenment tendency to disparage faith. And there were several prominent Catholic converts from this tradition, including Orestes Bronson and Isaac Heckler.

C. Orestes Bronson (1803 – 1876) was originally a Universalist minister, but joined the Catholic Church in 1844, convinced that she was the best hope for civilization. He launched a journal called the Bronston Quarterly Review to encourage Catholic scholarship in this country. Through articles there and elsewhere, he argued that Catholicism both defended the rightful American spirit and guarded against excessive opulence and dependence on government or industry.

D. Venerable Isaac Heckler (1819 – 1888) was the son of German immigrants and a friend of Orestes Bronson. With Bronson, he joined the Catholic Church in 1844 and then became a Redemptorist priest. In that capacity, he conducted revival missions along the East Coast in the 1850s. In 1858, he formed the Missionary Priests of St. Paul the Apostle (the Paulist fathers) to bring Catholicism into American culture in a way that would appeal to Americans using such things as newspapers, bookstores and revivals to promote the Catholic faith here. The order, which has about 120 members, continues this mission to this day.

- E. The Romantic movement, including the writings of Orestes Bronson and Isaac Heckler, tended to favor a more decentralized governance structure in the Church with more lay participation and governance.

VI. Both the immigration and the Romantic movement led to the increasing question of how “American” Catholic parishes and schools should be.

- A. Ecumenical relations were not formally developed yet, and so there was still a great deal of antagonism between the Catholic Church and Protestant Churches, at least on the theological level. However, American Catholics did want to emphasize that they were fully American and supported the principles of American freedom, democracy and religious tolerance.
- B. There was also a debate about how immigration should affect the Catholic Church in America. On the one hand, the immigrant communities wanted to run parishes that appealed to their group. On the other hand, the Church is universal and wanted to join different communities together. On the one hand, American Catholics emphasized their patriotism; on the other hand they wanted to develop their unique culture.

VII. The Catholic Church had to deal with the increasing issue of slavery and race relations. The Catholic Church emphasized racial equality and was often a model for defending human rights. However, there were Catholic slaveholders in the United States. And many of the Catholic clergy in slave holding regions defended the institution.

- A. Until about 1830, it looked like slavery was gradually on the decline in the United States. However, from about 1830 to the Civil War, several factors increased support for slavery in the South, and the willingness of most people in the North to accept slavery in the South. These factors included the breeding of slaves, agricultural technology that made large plantations very profitable, the demand for cotton and tobacco, and fears that free blacks would compete with white labor and might be revolutionary. While there was an active abolitionist movement, it got to the point that very few in the North wanted to do much more than keep slavery out of any new states.
- B. At first both the Democratic party and the Whig party (which developed in the 1830s) had people on both sides of the issue. However, as the 1840s and 1850s progressed, the Democratic party tended to be more favorable to allowing slavery in the territories; the Whig party gradually was more favorable to free soil, but then collapsed as the Republican party took over. Most Catholics were Democrats, not based upon the slavery issue, but because the Whigs tended to be anti-immigrant and often anti-Catholic. But the Catholic bishops tried to avoid party affiliation.
- C. Catholics in America were not typically wealthy; and thus, in most of the country, slaveholders were not Catholic. However, by 1860, Catholic slaveholders did possess about 300,000 slaves (out of about 4 million nationally), mostly in Louisiana, with some in Maryland and other states. Some bishops, especially from the North and Northwest favored the eventual abolition of slavery. But other Catholic bishops, mostly from the

South, argued that slavery, while unfortunate, was a part of human society. Bishop John England of Charleston, South Carolina strongly defended this view. For example, in 1840, he wrote a letter to the Secretary of State John Forsythe saying that Pope XVI's 1839 apostolic letter In Supremo Apostolatus only condemned the slave trade and new "involuntary slavery," as opposed to the maintenance of current slaves and the arrangement by which people can sell themselves into slavery. Bishop Francis Kenrick of Saint Louis accepted the fact of slavery, but also argued for the human rights of those held in slavery, especially the rights to worship, marry, and be educated.

D. Many women religious orders accepted black members, which would have been radical for the time. Mother Mary Lange even established the Oblate Sisters of Providence for black American women and to education black children in 1828, and it expanded to about 40 women by 1861. Eight of those members were freed slaves.

VIII. The development of the Catholic Church in American in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century is exemplified by four exemplary American Catholics, two bishops and two religious sisters.

- A. Perhaps the greatest leader among the new Catholic immigrants was St. John Neumann, who also strongly supported Catholic education.
1. Born to a rural business family in Bohemia in 1811, John Neumann entered seminary and was a bright student. But he had trouble becoming a priest because his means were limited and there was an abundance of clergy in his home diocese. And so he wrote letters to American bishops asking for ordination in their diocese. Bishop John DuBois of New York accepted his request and ordained him a priest of New York.
  2. After a successful ministry in western New York, he joined the Redemptorist order in 1840 and became leader of the American province in 1848. In that role, he increased the discipline of the rapidly expanding the Redemptorist presence in America. However, his moves caused some unpopularity, and so he happily resigned that role in 1850.
  3. But Pope Pius IX approved of his policies and appointed him Bishop of Philadelphia in 1852. In that role, he presided over the expansion of the Catholic presence in that city and the state of Pennsylvania, which had become a center of immigration. In his short episcopacy of 8 years, he established 73 parishes and increased the number of Catholic schools from 1 school with 500 students to 100 schools with 9000 students.
  4. He also wrote two catechisms and invited the Sisters of Notre Dame and the Christian Brothers to help with the educational efforts; he also brought in the Oblate Sister of Providence from Haiti, who which increased racial diversity within the Church.
  5. By his death in 1860, Bishop John Neumann had overcome much prejudice and established Philadelphia as a Catholic center in this nation.

B. Bishop John Hughes of New York also powerfully defended Catholic interests even as he tried to develop a more American identity in the American Catholic Church.

1. John Hughes was born to a devout Catholic farming family in County Tyrone, Ireland in 1797; and he experienced the discrimination of the penal laws against Catholics at the time. In his teens he studied agriculture as an apprentice to a local manor gardener. His family immigrated to the United States in 1816, and he joined then in 1817.

2. His application to study at Mount Saint Mary Seminary was at first rejected, but the seminary hired him as a gardener. In that role, he impressed both the administration and the recently arrived St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. As a result, he was allowed to join the seminary in 1820, studying for the Diocese of Philadelphia.

3. After his ordination in 1826, Fr. Hughes served as an associate pastor and then a missionary in western Pennsylvania. Eventually, as pastor of St. Mary Church in Philadelphia, he dealt with parishioners who were rebelling against the bishop over building plans; but he eventually got the new church built. As that building project was occurring, he also engaged in public debates with the prominent Presbyterian minister John Breckenridge over the compatibility of Catholicism with the American experiment

4. With his increasing reputation, Pope Gregory XVI appointed him coadjutor bishop of the Diocese of New York in 1837, under Bishop John Dubois. In 1842 he became the Bishop of New York, which was made an archdiocese in 1850. He served in that position until his death in 1864.

5. Even as the coadjutor, he had to deal with issues of lay trusteeism, and successfully lobbied the city state government to recognize that all church properties were under the bishop.

6. But he also got into a struggle with the city government over education. In 1842, he protested against the use of the King James Bible and several anti-Catholic history books in the public schools; and he lobbied for state funds for private schools. In the election of 1842, he made the surprising move of supporting several Whig candidates who were favorable to his cause despite the party's general opposition. After that election, he prevailed upon the city government to withdraw the anti-Catholic books, although he never secured government funding for Catholic schools. Even without that funding, he started the Catholic school system in New York, arguing to Catholics that we needed our own schools to teach our values.

7. During the anti-Catholic riots of 1844, he placed guards at Catholic churches. When a proposed Nativist rally raised the prospects of destroying Catholic churches, he warned that if "a single Catholic Church is burned in New York, the city will become a second Moscow." The reference to Moscow recalled the burning of that city by Russian troops in 1812 to prevent its occupation by Napoleon's army. The city officials then cancelled the rally. Due in part to the fact that he carried a dagger with him for protection, he became known as "Dagger John" Hughes.

8. He founded a diocesan newspaper in 1849, entitled the New York Freeman, in which he argued that Catholicism was central to the progress of the United States. And he was

very clear in his intention to convert people to the Catholic faith. However, in that newspaper and elsewhere, he praised the American ideal of freedom and religious tolerance, and recognized that versions of Protestantism had been central to America's beginning. For example, in 1858, he wrote a letter to Pope Pius IX arguing for American style democracy and religious freedom. In 1858, he also began construction of what is now Saint Patrick Cathedral in New York; at the time it dominated the street it was on.

9. Bishop Hughes was active in national public life as well. In 1847, he addressed Congress and argued for the benefits of immigration. Before the Civil War, he favored the eventual abolition of slavery, although like most northerners he did not press for it immediately. And he argued for remedies to the oppression of many workers (especially immigrants) in the North. President Lincoln sent him as the effective envoy to Pope Pius IX during the Civil War. The President also asked his advice on how to arrange for hospital chaplains, and he favored the Northern cause until his death in 1864.

10. Bishop Hughes has ever since been considered a model of the defense of the Catholic faith in this nation, and of a commitment to Catholic schools and newspapers.

C. Saint Theodora Guerin was a French immigrant and religious sister who brought the Sisters of Providence to the United States and established many schools and retirement homes for the Catholic Church in Indiana.

1. Anne Therese Guerin in 1798 to a middle class family in Brittany, France; her father was an officer in Napoleon's army. Of the four children, only she and her sister lived to adulthood. From an early age, Theodora wanted to join religious life. But in 1813, her father was killed by robbers, and the need to care for her mother delayed her entry until 1823. At that time, she entered the Sisters of Providence and took the name Theodora. In that capacity, she taught in schools and cared for the sick; and one point, while caring for victims of smallpox, she caught the disease; from that time on her diet was very limited.

2. In 1829, Bishop Simon Brute of Vincennes, Indiana (who had been with Father Dubois at the founding of Mount Saint Mary Seminary) sent a representative to France to ask for a religious house to be established in his diocese to teach and care for the sick. At that time, the Diocese covered Indiana and eastern Illinois, and was considered the back country. It had been the scene of much strife between Americans and the Indians during the preceding 20 years, including the famous battle of Tippecanoe in 1811. In 1829, the National Road was being built through Indiana, along with numerous other public works that were going to lead to a dramatic increase in settlement.

3. Bishop Brute died while the representative was in France, but the request was fulfilled with the Mother Superior of the Sisters of Providence suggesting that Sister Theodora lead the mission.

4. It took a while to arrange the mission. But in 1840, now Mother Theodora and five other sisters set forth to Indiana and arrived in a town called Saint Mary of

the Woods, Indiana. Their first home was in a farmhouse belonging to a local Catholic family.

5. There were numerous initial setbacks for them, and for the settlers generally, including crop failures, fires, and the lack of financial resources generally. But, despite her ill health, Mother Theodora was remarkable in her prayerfulness and business talents alike. And the order quickly gained new members and established schools, orphanages, and charitable operations in Indiana and Illinois. By Mother Theodora's death in 1857, the order had established 13 schools, two orphanages, and even two free pharmacies in these areas; at that time, the order had grown to 83 sisters. Mother Theodora's houses eventually became their own branch of the Sisters of Providence, and now have about 300 members.
6. In 1907, Bishop Francis Chatard of Indianapolis initiated the cause for Mother Theodora's canonization. Pope St. John Paul II declared her to be blessed in 1998; and Pope Benedict XVI canonized her in 2006.

D. Venerable Henriette Delille was a mixed race resident of Louisiana who established a religious congregation for the service and education of the poor in that area of the county.

1. She was born in New Orleans in 1813 into a mixed race family, with her father being a merchant born in France, and her mother being descending from Spanish, African Haitians, and French. Their marriage was a "common law" one because people of mixed race were technically not allowed to marry legally in that and most other states or for that matter French and Spanish territories; but the arrangement was widely accepted in Louisiana. Her mother taught her well in both culture and practical medicine, and she was being set up for a good marriage, although still a common law one.
2. The family was Catholic, but Henriette was not confirmed until the age of 21. At the age of 14, she began teaching in a local Catholic school, and also was active in caring for the poor. There is some record that she may have given birth to two sons during her teens, but if so both of them died young. In any case, after her Confirmation, she became much more devout.
3. Her father died when she was a teenager, and her mother suffered a nervous breakdown when Henriette was 22. She took control of the family assets. And, after providing for her mother, used the remainder to found a new religious group of women called the Sisters of the Presentation with the help of two friends Juliette Gaudin and Josephine Charles. The house, which originally had eight members including Henriette, gave free instructions and cared for the sick and the poor. The order established the first Catholic retirement home in this country.
4. With the help of a local priest, the order received official Vatican approval in 1837 and shortly thereafter changed its name to the Sisters of the Holy Family.

5. Henriette died in 1862 at the age of 49, largely due to exhaustion from serving the people of New Orleans, especially during the first year of the Civil War. The order had grown slowly up to this point, having 12 members at the time. However, the order grew more after that, to the point of having 300 members now, with schools and nursing and retirement homes in seven cities in the United States and Belize.
  
6. The Sisters of the Holy Family inaugurated the cause for her canonization in 1988. In 2010, the Vatican Congregation of Saints concluded that she had lived a life of heroic virtue worthy of canonization, and Pope Benedict XVI thus gave her the official title Servant of God. The Vatican is now awaiting the confirmation of miracles for her beatification and canonization.