

CATHOLICISM IN THE UNITED STATES 1565-1830

Part One: Evangelization of America and Canada

In this article, we will look at:

- Land of Native Americans
- Spanish missionary efforts
- French Missions
- Catholicism in British Colonies
- Catholicism and the American Revolution
- John Carroll, America's First Bishop
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Land of Native Americans

Long before the Europeans came to what is now North America and Canada, Native American people had been on this continent for thousands of years. Historians can only guess at numbers, but many believe that no more than two million natives lived in what is now the United States.

Although the Native Americans are diverse in religious belief and practice, they all seem to believe in an unseen world in which exist unseen gods and demons that undergird and sustain the world that is seen and sensed.

The following well-known Mohawk Prayer gives us some insight into the spirituality of the Native American.

A Mohawk Prayer

*O Great Spirit, creator of all things:
Human beings, trees, grass, berries,
Help us, be kind to us.
Let us be happy on earth.
Let us lead our children
To a good life and old age.
These our people;
Give them good minds
To love one another.
O Great Spirit,
Be kind to us.
Give these people the favor
To see green trees,
Green grass, flowers and berries
This next spring;
So we all meet again,
O Great Spirit,
We ask of you.*

For about 250 years prior to the 1776 signing of the Declaration of Independence, the story of North America is largely the story of three European powers—Spain, France and England—struggling with each other and with the Native Americans for control of the New World. Each of these European powers brings with them missionaries anxious to share the Gospel with the natives.

Spanish missionary efforts

Spain is the first colonial power to come to the New World, arriving in the early 1500's. In his four voyages to the New World on behalf of Spain, Columbus has never set foot on the North American mainland. In 1513 Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon arrives in Florida. On his second voyage in 1521, priests and brothers travel with him and are ordered by King Charles of Spain to teach the Indians "our holy Catholic faith."

The initial efforts of the missionaries met with little success until 1565 when the Spanish found St. Augustine in Florida. It is the first North American colony and the oldest city in the United States where the oldest Catholic parish, Nombre de Dios ("Name of God"), is located. It is estimated that by the mid-1600s, there are about 25,000 Christian Indians in Florida. Shortly after 1700, however, most of the work of the Spanish missionaries is destroyed when English colonists from Carolina invade Florida.

Southwest. The Spanish are also the first to explore the southwest, what is mainly now Texas and New Mexico. They encounter several nations of Indians in pueblos or villages. By the late 1600's, there may have been as many as 35,000 Indian converts to Christianity in and around New Mexico. The city of Santa Fe is founded at this time. But the missionaries' successes are reversed when the Spanish conquerors raid Indian settlements in search of slaves, resulting in an Indian uprising in 1680. Many churches are destroyed, many Franciscans are killed, and many Indians revert back to their old religious practices.

When the Spanish settlers return in 1692, a new wave of missionaries accompany them and try to convert

the Indians who are still there. Many have left the area for California.

Eusebio Francisco Kino (1645-1711). The most famous pioneer priest in early Arizona is Fr. Kino, a Jesuit priest from Italy and a scholar in the fields of mathematics and astronomy. He provides critically needed mapping skills in the areas where he serves. He baptizes thousands of Indians, trains them in agricultural skills, and establishes many missions. His statue stands in the Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C., placed there by the State of Arizona.

California. In 1769, Spanish friars begin missionary activity in California. The best known of these missionaries is **Junipero Serra (1713-1784)** whose statue also graces the Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C. Fr. Serra sets up nine of the 21 missions along the coast of California, among them, San Diego, Santa Clara and San Francisco.

Each mission post has churches, schools and marketplaces where men and women learn many trades and skills. While some of the friars treat the natives with dignity and respect, others are not as respectful.

French Missions

With France's rise to European dominance in the 17th century comes the turn of the French explorers and missionaries to visit the western continent. The French headquarter their colonial outposts in Canada, (called New France in those days), particularly in Quebec City (1608) and Montreal (1642). French missionaries are filled with zeal to share the Catholic faith with Native Americans.

Soon the French are anxious to continue their explorations. This leads them to the northern tier of the American states: along the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River from Minnesota to Maine. The explorers bring with them clergy who work at evangelizing the natives. Some of the missionaries are outstanding explorers in their own rights. For example, Jesuit Jacques Marquette (1637-1675) with explorer Louis Jolliet (1645-1700) discover the Mississippi River. Francis Louis Hennepin comes upon Niagara Falls. One historian writing about this era has said: "Not a river was entered without a Jesuit." The names of many of today's American cities attest to the explorations of the adventurous French, e.g., Duluth, New Orleans and St. Louis.

Isaac Jogues (1607-1646) is one of the most famous French missionaries. When Fr. Jogues, who has much success with the Huron Indian tribe, tries to convert their archenemy, the Iroquois, he is captured and subjected to terrible tortures, including the mutilation of his fingers. After his rescue, he returns to France to a hero's welcome. Fr. Jogues could have remained in France for the rest of his life, basking in his fame and celebrity. Instead, he insists on returning to the very people who treated him so badly. Three months later at the age of 39, he is tomahawked to death. Two of his lay companions suffer the same fate. These three martyred missionaries are among the eight designated by the Church as the North American Martyrs. They are declared saints in 1930.

St. Kateri Tekakwitha. In addition to the Spanish and French Martyrs, there are also some Indian Christian martyrs, the most famous of whom is Kateri Tekakwitha. Born in 1656 in upstate New York to a Mohawk chief and a captured Christian, Algonquin mother, Kateri is orphaned at a young age when her parents die of smallpox, a disease she also contracts. She is raised as a Mohawk princess. When she is 20 years old, a French missionary baptizes her, an event that causes her much suffering. Fortunately, she escapes from her persecutors, traveling hundreds of miles to an Indian Christian village near present-day Montreal. There she devotes the rest of her short life to prayer, penance and care of the sick and the aged. Kateri dies in 1680 at the age of 24. On October 21, 2012, she is canonized as the first North American Indian saint.

French Ursuline Nuns arrive in New France once the missions are established in Quebec and Montreal. They found schools and engage in charitable works.

France's defeat in the New World. French missions in the Midwest decline when Pope Clement XIV tries to suppress the Jesuits. In addition, Catholicism in the New World takes a big hit when the hostilities in Europe between Catholic France and Protestant England spill over into the New World.

When the English get the better of the war in the New World, many French Canadians are deported or move south all the way to present-day Louisiana where many of the descendants are known as Cajuns. With the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the French give Canada to the British. In 1774 the British Parliament passes the Quebec Act giving French Canadians (mostly

Catholic) freedom to practice their religion and to hold elective offices.

Catholicism in British Colonies

By the time the British arrive in America, the country has turned Protestant and very anti-Catholic. Catholics in England are forbidden to own property, vote or practice their religion.

When the British travel to Jamestown, Virginia, they bring with them a strong anti-Catholic bias. By the late 1600's, three forms of Protestantism have developed: Puritanism in New England, Anglicanism in Virginia, and the Quaker religion and other diverse groups in Pennsylvania and the Middle Colonies.

The Puritans come to American shores seeking religious freedom but for themselves alone. Those who dissent from accepted belief and practice are often cast out of the colony.

The Quakers, founded by William Penn in 1681, practice toleration in religious matters. The Pennsylvania colony soon becomes a haven for those persecuted for their faith. William Penn (1644-1718) becomes widely known not only for his religious toleration, but also for his rare sense of justice to the American Indian. Penn is a man morally ahead of his time.

The Maryland Colony is most unusual because it is founded by a Catholic, George Calvert, Lord Baltimore (1580-1632). George Calvert loses his job as Secretary of State in England when he converts to Catholicism. His intent in coming to America is to open a colony where Protestants and Catholics can live together. In 1649, the colonial legislature passes the historic *Toleration Act*, which makes Lord Baltimore's policies of religious freedom the law of the colony. At that time, the colony is independent of the English Crown. In 1652, the Puritans seize power in Maryland; Catholics are driven from public office. The *Toleration Act* is repealed. In 1691, Maryland becomes a British colony and the Anglican Church ends up being the official church of the colony. Catholics are taxed against their will for the upkeep of the Anglican Church. Catholic services are forbidden. Catholics cannot hold public office and cannot vote. Concerning this period in American church history, Fr. Clyde Crews writes:

In summary, Catholics in colonial America represented a minuscule portion of the population.

They tended to keep a very low profile throughout the colonial era. They made no large-scale attempt to convert their fellow citizens, but were among the first Catholics in the world to champion the cause of religious toleration and liberty in matters of Church and State. It was especially appropriate that the document dubbed the "American gift" at the Second Vatican Council – the Declaration on Religious Liberty – should have come mainly from the heart and hand of a Maryland-based Jesuit: John Courtney Murray.

These colonial Catholics maintained fidelity to their religion, even though the general tenor of place and time was decidedly anti-Catholic. They would be startled by an American nation in which Catholicism is not only an accepted part of the mainstream, but also the largest single denomination (American and Catholic, pp 44-45).

Catholicism and the American Revolution

As the fateful year of independence draws near, the English colonists of North America number some 2.5 million people. Nearly one-fourth of these are people of color, most of them slaves. The three largest cities have smaller populations than many modern suburbs: an estimated 30,000 in Philadelphia, 25,000 in New York City and 16,000 in Boston.

It is estimated that no more than ten percent of the people are members of any church. Catholics of the colonies constitute about one percent of the population. When the Revolution begins, New York City, Boston and Charleston have not a single permanent Catholic parish within their boundaries. There may have been fewer than 600 Catholics in all of New England.

And yet, several Catholics play a significant role in the achievement of American independence. One of the wealthiest persons in the colonies, Charles Carroll (1737-1832) spends his entire fortune on the American fight for independence. He is the only Catholic signatory on the Declaration of Independence. Charles' cousin, Daniel Carroll, greatly influences the drafting of the Constitution. His leadership is largely responsible for the drafters' rejection of a proposal to have presidents be elected by Congress rather than by the people.

Another notable Catholic revolutionary figure is John Barry, the father of the American Navy. Catholics from Europe also come to help the Polish freedom

fighters, Thaddeus Kosciusko and Casimir Pulaski, who fight heroically while Frenchman Marquis de Lafayette gains renown as a commander under George Washington.

Protestants admire these patriots and begin to soften on their prejudices. They also realize that America needs the help of Catholic France to win the Revolution. Hence, they begin to treat Catholics more favorably. Finally, after the successful rebellion, the Founding Fathers think it best to write into the Constitution the principle of religious toleration.

John Carroll (1735-1815), America's First Bishop

A cousin of Charles Carroll and younger brother of Daniel Carroll, John Carroll was born into a Maryland family of social and financial status. He is educated in Europe, enters the Jesuits and teaches in Belgium. After the Jesuits are suppressed, John becomes a diocesan priest and returns to America.

Partly due to the recommendation of Benjamin Franklin, Fr. John Carroll is appointed on June 9, 1784 as "Superior of the American Missions," a position he holds until 1789. At this time, the new Republic of the United States has no bishop; hence, the sacraments of Confirmation and Holy Orders cannot be administered. In 1789, Rome does something unusual: it invites the priests of the infant country to select the man to serve as the first American bishop. Their choice is not surprising. In May 1789 at White Marsh Plantation, the assembled clergy vote 24-2 in favor of John Carroll as bishop of Baltimore. (That same year George Washington becomes the new nation's first President.) The diocese he is to administer comprises the entire nation—stretching from the Atlantic to the Mississippi and from the Great lakes to the Florida border. On August 15, 1790, John Carroll is consecrated bishop in a chapel in a castle in England. (In order for a priest to be consecrated a bishop, other bishops have to be present to lay their hands on his head. Since America had no bishops at the time, Fr. Carroll had to go to a place where there were bishops.) For the next 25 years, the new bishop will lead the Catholic Church in America with great dedication and wisdom.

- Bishop Carroll brings in Sulpician priests from Europe to open America's first seminary—St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore—which becomes the training ground for future church leaders.

- He is instrumental in the founding of Georgetown University in 1789, America's first Catholic University.
- He encourages and supports the ministry of pioneering religious orders.
- He supports a strong Catholic press and the use of English in the liturgy, something Rome does not allow.
- Through his diplomacy, four states (Pennsylvania, Delaware, Virginia and Maryland) adopt constitutions allowing Catholics complete equality with other citizens.
- He opens four new dioceses in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Bardonia, Kentucky. After the creation of these dioceses, Bishop Carroll is made an Archbishop.
- During his time as bishop, the Catholic population has grown from 30,000 to 200,000.
- Archbishop Carroll is held in high esteem by early American leaders like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

Frontier Church. With the expansion of U.S. territories west of the Appalachian Mountains in early 1800's, thousands of settlers begin moving westward. Many of these frontier people are Catholic, so missionaries travel with them. New dioceses cover so much territory that bishops and priests spend a lot of time on horseback, traveling from one settlement to another administering the sacraments and instructing the people.

Crucial role of religious communities

The diocesan clergy receive wonderful help from religious orders of women and men.

- **St. Rose Philippine Duchesne (1769-1852)** establishes the first U.S. convent, the Sacred Heart in Missouri. She also opens schools for Indians and orphanages.
- **Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821)** is the daughter of an aristocratic Episcopalian family and a widowed mother of five. After the death of her husband, Elizabeth Ann converts to Catholicism and founds the American Sisters of Charity. She opens many schools that become the pattern for

the American school system. Her order also founds hospitals and serves heroically during the Civil War. She is the first native-born American to be canonized a saint.

- ***Mother Frances Cabrini (1850-1917)*** is the founder of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. She labors among the Italian immigrants and opens and staffs many hospitals, schools and orphanages.
- ***Katherine Drexel (1858-1955)*** is sometimes called the “million dollar nun.” After her father dies in 1901, Katherine and her sister receive an inheritance amounting to \$1,000 a day. Katherine founds the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and opens more than 50 houses of sisters to care for poor blacks and Indians. She also founds Xavier University in New Orleans, the first University for blacks in America.
- ***Rose Hawthorne Lathrop (1851-1925)*** is the daughter of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Like Elizabeth Ann Seton, Rose is a convert mother and widow. After the death of her husband from whom she has separated because of a drinking problem, Rose opens a religious order to care for the poor and people with incurable cancer.
- ***Religious orders of men*** such as the Holy Cross Brothers, De La Salle Christian Brothers, and Franciscans play significant roles in education on the frontier and “Back West.” By the mid 1800’s, Holy Cross priests have founded Notre Dame University in Indiana; Benedictine monks have founded St. John’s University in Minnesota; and the Society of Mary has begun St. Mary’s University in Texas.
- ***St. John Neumann (1811-1860)*** was born in Bohemia and becomes the fourth bishop of Philadelphia. He is a great theologian and fluent in eight languages. At the time of his consecration as bishop, there are two parochial schools in the Philadelphia diocese. By the time of his death, there are nearly 200 schools. He is canonized a saint in 1997.