

AMERICAN CHURCH HISTORY

1900 – 1960

Part Three: The Catholic Church in America

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In this third and final article on American Church History, we will look at the continuing growth of the Catholic Church in America, more specifically:

- Coming of Age—no longer mission a territory
- Big strong parishes
- World War I and after
- Bishops' involvement in political and social reform
- Anti-Catholicism
- Fr. Coughlin and Dorothy Day
- World War II and after
- Golden years of American Catholics
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Coming of Age—no longer a mission territory

In 1908, Rome officially recognizes that the United States is no longer a mission country. In 1906, only 14 American Catholics are involved in missionary work overseas. In 1911, two American priests (Fathers James Walsh and Thomas Price) found *The Foreign Mission Society of America*, better known as "**Maryknoll**." The Maryknoll priests, sisters and brothers become the face of American mission work especially in Asia. Many of them suffer greatly when the communists take over countries like China. After Vatican II, Maryknoll sisters become actively involved in the issue of global justice and the needs of the poor. In 1980, Sisters Maura Clarke and Ita Ford are among four church women killed by the military in El Salvador.

Big bustling parishes

By the year 1900, Catholics in America number about 12 million out of a total population of 76 million. These Catholics live in 82 dioceses and are served by 12,000 priests and thousands of religious brothers and sisters who staff a large and growing network of Catholic schools and other institutions. One of the great figures of this period is **Mother Cabrini** (1850-1917). She and her sisters work among Italian immigrants in Chicago and other cities.

In 1946, Frances Cabrini becomes the first United States citizen to be canonized.

The early twentieth century is a golden time for big city parishes in America. In places like Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis and Milwaukee, there are large Catholic neighborhoods at the center of which is the local church and school. Some of these parishes minister to up to 20,000 parishioners. The parish is so much a part of the people's lives that they identify the area of the city where they live, not by the name of the street or neighborhood, but by the name of the local parish church.

Loyalties are especially strong in *national parishes*, which care for the needs of one particular ethnic group, such as the Poles or the Italians. By the 1920's, there are thousands of these national parishes scattered across the United States. In Chicago alone in 1916, there are 122 national parishes serving 15 different ethnic groups. These parishes serve a great purpose as way stations where immigrants can feel at home in a strange new land. There, people can meet, hear their native language spoken in the pulpit, and carry on the special religious traditions that have been brought from the old country.

World War I and after

American Catholics involved in World War I. When America enters First World War in 1917, Catholics troop the colors in record numbers. The one million Catholics in the armed forces constitute over 20% of the U.S. military. Catholics are pleased to cite such numbers to prove their patriotism at a time when Catholics are still considered "foreigners."

In 1917, the *National Catholic War Council* is created to help relief efforts during the war. Several years later, this important agency will be renamed the *National Catholic Welfare Conference*. This council advises the bishops on many issues and coordinates their efforts in the areas of education, national legislation, youth and lay organizations, immigration and social action.

Bishops' Program of Social Reconstruction

In 1919, the bishops release a moral and political document which becomes known as the "Bishops Program of Social Reconstruction." This document—largely the brainchild of Fr. John Ryan—is the first major statement by the Catholic bishops of the United States on social and economic issues. The Program helps to place the American hierarchy in the frontlines among those in the Church worldwide who specifically link political and social action to the Gospel. It calls for sweeping changes in the government's role in order to improve the social condition of the people. It advocates labor's right to organize and bargain collectively, as well as government-backed insurance to protect against unemployment, illness, accident and old age. Many of these proposals will not come into law until the "New Deal" years.

John Ryan (1869-1945) is the eldest son of eleven children born to Irish immigrants. He is destined to become a priest, professor, social philosopher and one of the most prominent social reformers of the twentieth century. His doctorate dissertation written in 1906 is titled "*A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects.*" His second most influential work, "*Distributive Justice*" in 1906, focuses on the ethical demands placed on industrial societies. He is an outspoken advocate of minimum wage legislation, federal legislation for workers' rights and the moral foundation of organized labor.

During the Great Depression, Father Ryan is a big supporter of President Roosevelt and the New Deal legislation, in particular, the National Labor Relations Act and the Fair Labor Standards. He gives the benediction at two of Roosevelt's inaugurations.

Anti-Catholicism

In 1887, the American Protection Act comes into being to counter the growth of immigrant power in America. In 1915 onward, a renewed *Ku Klux Klan* turns its attention towards Catholics as well as blacks and Jews. In the 1920's, Florida Governor Catts warns that the pope is planning an invasion of Florida. In 1922, the state of Oregon passes a law requiring *all* parents to send their children to public school. This law makes all private and religious schools illegal. In 1925, the U.S. Supreme Court declares the law illegal. In 1928, the Democratic

Party nominates Governor Alfred Smith, a Catholic, as their candidate for President of the United States. For the first time since the Civil War, about half of the states of the "solid South" which have always voted Democratic, elect the Republican candidate Herbert Hoover. It should be noted that Smith lost for reasons other than his Catholicism; for example, he opposed prohibition in a nation that still believed in its value.

International Eucharistic Congress in Chicago (1926). Beginning in the early twentieth century, "eucharistic congresses" are held periodically all over the world. These are massive gatherings of Catholics to pay homage to Christ in the Eucharist. Besides their devotional and teaching value, these congresses serve as a dramatic *public* display of the vitality of the Church.

The first International Eucharist Congress in the United States is held in Chicago in 1926. Nine cardinals from America and Europe attend in their splendid red robes. Catholics from all across America participate. Nearly a half million kneel in the rain-soaked grounds of St. Mary's of the Lake Seminary (now called Mundelein) for the final benediction ceremony. A people content to practice their faith privately are now sufficiently self-confident to publicly display their Catholic faith with its unique style.

Fr. Charles Coughlin and Dorothy Day—two very different voices in the 1930s

In the 1930's, two very different voices rise up in the Catholic Church in America.

Charles Coughlin, a Canadian priest ministering in Detroit, hosts a radio program that at its height has about 40 million listeners. Initially, Coughlin is a social reformer and a supporter of Roosevelt's New Deal. But then he turns against the policies of Roosevelt and capitalism. He is also an opponent of Socialism. When Coughlin becomes anti-Semitic, sympathizing with fascist causes in Germany and Italy, his bishop steps in and orders him to stop his radio show.

Dorothy Day. On the opposite side of the political and social spectrum, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin found the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933. This Movement emphasizes radical gospel living through identification with the poor. They open up *Houses of*

Hospitality in cities around the country that welcome the homeless and feed the unemployed and hungry. Dorothy Day publishes *The Catholic Worker*, a newspaper devoted to peace and the rights of workers. Over the years, Catholic workers provide an outlet for the idealism of young Catholics. They also raise the consciences of their fellow Catholics during the Vietnam War, calling into question its morality.

World War II and after

When the United States enters World War II in 1941, millions of Catholics join the armed forces and respond with patriotic fervor to the call to fight fascism. Catholics also serve in large numbers in the Korean War (1950-1953) to repel Communist aggression by Communist Red China and North Korea.

The Golden Years of American Catholicism

After World War II, the Church in America experiences profound changes as a result of post-war socio-economic developments. Catholics flock to college with the help of the GI Bill, a government program that helps with education costs. Between 1940 and 1960, the Catholic population doubles from 21million to 42 million. Catholics are better off economically than ever before. Millions of Catholics move from the old inner city ethnic neighborhoods to the suburbs. In the 1950's, almost 2,000 new schools are built. These schools and seminaries and novitiates are filled to capacity. The Trappists could scarcely build monasteries fast enough to accommodate the influx of vocations. New parish churches are built at a dizzying rate. The social life of Catholics is centered around the parish. Men join the *Holy Name Society*, and women, the *Catholic Council of Women*. The *Christian Family Movement* strengthens family bonds and deepens the spirituality and vocation of the laity. Teens are involved in Catholic youth organizations.

By 1960, Catholicism has become a very strong force in American life. In November 1960, John F. Kennedy is elected as the first American Catholic President, shattering an invisible barrier. Across the nation, Catholics feel that they have finally achieved first-class status as loyal citizens.

Racial justice

In the early and mid-1900's, the Catholic position on racial justice unfortunately reflects general American attitudes. Catholic parishes and schools are segregated until after the end of World War II. Leaders like Fr. John LaFarge, S.J., and the Catholic Interracial Council work tirelessly to help change Catholic attitudes. In the late 1940's, some bishops begin to work for racial justice in their dioceses. Cardinal Ritter of St. Louis ends segregation in diocesan schools in 1947, followed by Cardinal O'Boyle of Washington in 1948. Bishop Waters desegregates Catholic schools in Raleigh in 1953.

Four well known faces of Catholicism in the 1950's

Bishop Fulton Sheen (1895-1979) runs a television series, "*Life is Worth Living*," a smash hit on prime time that draws large numbers of Catholics and non-Catholics to his brilliant, entertaining and thought-provoking lectures. He is also famous for bringing well known converts into the Church, e.g., author and ambassador Claire Booth Luce.

Francis Cardinal Spellman (1889-1967) is Archbishop of New York from 1939 to 1967. While working in Rome, he becomes a friend of Eugenio Pacelli, (the future Pius XII). As Archbishop of New York, he is the most powerful Catholic leader in the country. He is so famous for his financial skill that he becomes known in New York as "Cardinal Moneybags" because of his ability to raise funds for a multitude of building projects. He is a close friend of President Roosevelt who uses him as a reliable emissary around the world. Both he and Bishop Fulton Sheen are outspoken opponents of communism. As an ardent anti-communist, Spellman backs the investigations of Senator Joseph McCarthy, who believes communists have infiltrated the U.S. government.

Cardinal Spellman is the Military Vicar of the U.S. Armed Forces. He travels widely to visit American troops stationed overseas. He is a strong advocate of the Vietnam War because of its opposition to the spread of communism. He speaks out against racial discrimination and provides funds for nuns and priests to take part in the Selma marches.

John Courtney Murray (1904-1967). A Jesuit priest and highly influential theologian, Fr. Murray is best known for his writings on the relationship between

church and state, religious liberty, and how church should exist in a pluralistic society. For Fr. Murray, the United States offers a very different model of church-state relations than that found in Europe, in which unity between the two is vigorously enunciated by popes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the face of continental liberalism. For Rome, the standard teaching is that while it would be imprudent to establish Catholicism as the official religion of a country where many people are not Catholic, it is appropriate and even obligatory to do so where Catholics are the large majority. The ideal state cannot be religiously neutral or indifferent.

After World War II, Fr. Murray challenges Rome's viewpoint. He justifies the principle of religious freedom *not* on the basis of indifference to truth but out of respect for the dignity and freedom of the individual, making coercion improper. These views meet with considerable opposition in the United States and in Rome. In 1954, Rome orders Fr. Murray to cease writing on religious freedom.

Because of his liberal views on religious freedom, Fr. Murray is not invited to the opening session of Vatican Council II in 1962. But Cardinal Spellman is able to secure him a place for the rest of the sessions where he plays a major role in the drafting of the Council's document on *Religious Liberty*. This document is often seen as America's contribution to the Council.

Thomas Merton (1915-1968). Born in France to an Anglican family, Thomas Merton is orphaned at the age of sixteen. Before his conversion to Catholicism in 1938, he receives a bachelor's and master's degree in Literature at Columbia University. Like St. Augustine, he leads a directionless and wild life for some years, fathering a child out of wedlock.

In 1941, Merton enters the Trappist monastery at Gethsemane, Kentucky. He thinks that he will not be allowed to write after entering the monastic life of solitude. But, thankfully, his abbot encourages him to write, a decision that not only has blessed the Christian world but also a monastery struggling with income and a bunch of young men wanting to join the monastery.

In 1949, Merton writes his spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which becomes an international bestseller. The following is an excerpt detailing his conversion.

Sometime in August, I finally answered an impulsion that had been working on me for a long time. Every Sunday, I had been going out on Long Island to spend the day with the same girl.... But every week, as Sunday came around, I was filled with a growing desire to stay in the city and go to some kind of church.

With the work I was doing in the library, a stronger desire began to assert itself, and I was drawn much more imperatively to the Catholic Church.
[More time passed; his studies continued.]

I took up the book about Gerard Manley Hopkins.... He was thinking of becoming a Catholic. All of a sudden, something began to stir within me, something began to push me, to prompt me. It was a movement that spoke like a voice.

"What are you waiting for?" it said. "Why are you sitting here? Why do you still hesitate? You know what you ought to do. Why don't you do it?" ...

And then everything inside me began to sing – to sing with peace, to sing with strength, and to sing with conviction.

Then I turned the corner of 121st Street, and the brick church and presbytery were before me. I stood in the doorway and rang the bell....

"Father, I want to become a Catholic."
(Quotes from *A Popular History of the Catholic Church*, p.83)

Merton goes on to write many highly regarded books, such as *Ascent to Truth* in 1951, *No Man is an Island* in 1955, and *Faith and Contemplation* in 1962. Towards the end of his life, Merton becomes a controversial figure because of his writings on social issues and mysticism. His increased interest in the East leads him to a tour of Asia, where he meets with numerous Eastern religious leaders, including the Dalai Lama. While in Bangkok, he dies by accidental electrocution in a guest room.

In 1959, a 77-year old Cardinal is elected Pope, one destined to bring about monumental changes in the Catholic Church. In the next article, we will look at Pope John XXIII and Vatican Council II.