

CATHOLICISM IN THE UNITED STATES 1830-1900

Part Two: The Immigrant Church

In this Article, we will look at:

- **How immigration increased the Catholic population**
- **Anti-Catholic bigotry**
- **Catholics and the Civil War**
- **Black Catholics and the slavery issue**
- **Assimilation and Americanism**
- **Examples of strong Church leadership**

Immigration increases the Catholic population

Between 1830 and 1920 (when immigration to America has been severely curtailed by Congress), about 30 million immigrants pour into America.

- The first wave of immigrants (1830-1860) are mostly Irish. The Catholic population jumps from about a half million in 1830 to over three million in 1860, making Catholicism the largest denomination in the country. The Irish remain mainly in the East.
- A second wave of immigrants arrive between 1860 and 1890. These are mainly Germans, equal in number to the Irish. They flow into the “German triangle” extending from Milwaukee to St. Louis to Cincinnati.
- A third wave of immigrants arrive between 1890 and 1920, consisting predominantly of Italians and Eastern Europeans.

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Anti-Catholic Bigotry

As the Catholic population in America continues to grow in large numbers, Protestants become fearful of a Catholic takeover. This leads to a new wave of anti-Catholic bigotry which had almost disappeared during the time of the American War of Independence.

Nativism. Protestants who have been in the country for many years do not relish the prospect of living

near immigrants whose habits, customs, and religious practices are foreign and threatening to them. Many of the Protestants begin calling themselves “Nativists.” They want the United States exclusively for “native-born Americans.” They conveniently forget that their ancestors were once immigrants and that the only true native-born Americans are the Indians.

Some anti-Catholic bigots start to write and circulate a series of pamphlets claiming that the Vatican and Catholic immigrants are planning to take over the country. Such anti-Catholic bigotry becomes violent sometimes. In 1834, a mob burns down an Ursuline convent near Boston. In 1844, *nativist* riots in Philadelphia result in the destruction of three Catholic churches and the death of a dozen people.

Know-Nothings. This wave of anti-Catholic bigotry reaches its peak in the 1850’s with the formation of a Protestant-sponsored political party called the “Know-Nothings” (so called because when questioned about their group, members would answer, “I don’t know”). Like the *Nativists*, the *Know-Nothings* incite riots against Catholic institutions and question the patriotism of Catholics. In the 1856 presidential election, when large numbers of

people are voting for the Know-Nothings, Abraham Lincoln reckons that “*When the Know-Nothings are elected, the Constitution will read, ‘All men are created equal, except Negroes, foreigners and Catholics.’*” Many Catholic newspapers are founded at this time to counteract the attacks of anti-Catholic bigots.

Catholics and the Civil War

On this issue, Michael Pennock writes:

When the Civil War came, Catholics fought on both sides of the conflict. General William Sheridan, a Catholic, was a commander for the Union; General P.G.T. Beauregard, a Catholic, led a Southern army. Church leaders could also be found on both sides of the conflict. Bishop John Hughes of New York traveled to Europe at President Lincoln’s request to explain the Union position. Meanwhile, Bishop Patrick Lynch of Charleston went to Rome to defend

the Confederate side. Priests also served as chaplains while more than five hundred sisters from more than twenty different orders heroically ministered to the wounded on both sides. President Lincoln singled out the Catholic sisters, praising them for their hospital service during the war. The loyalty and sacrifice of both Union and Confederate Catholic soldiers impressed their fellow citizens. Their heroism and devotion largely put to rest nativists charges that Catholics were unpatriotic.” (This is our Church, p.25)

Black Catholics and the slavery issue

Of the four million slaves emancipated in 1863, an estimated 100,000 are Catholic, about 60,000 of them in New Orleans. Many blacks convert to Catholicism through the evangelizing efforts of the Jesuits in Maryland and Louisiana.

In the early 1870’s, two missionary communities—the Mill Hill Fathers and the Congregation of the Holy Ghost—travel from England to the United States to work among freed blacks. Even before the war, two communities of black sisters have been successfully established in the country: the Oblate Sisters of Providence at Baltimore in 1829, and the Sisters of the Holy Family at New Orleans in 1842. Both before and after the war, various communities of sisters (such as the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet at St. Louis in 1845) have opened schools for black children, but at times are forced to close down because of threats of violence.

Unfortunately, within the Catholic Church, blacks face the same discrimination as they do within the rest of society. Augustus Tolton is refused admission to any Catholic seminary in America, so he goes to Rome in 1886 for training and ordination. He is the first black priest ordained for the United States.

Blacks are not allowed to attend Catholic universities, and black parishes remain separated from predominantly white parishes until the 1950’s. Nevertheless, an active, committed, proud-to-be-Catholic black laity begin to develop. Five Black Catholic Lay Congresses are held in the late 1800’s. Participants are outspoken on the issue of racism, insisting that it is contrary to Catholic teaching. Their

voices are some of the earliest to call for social justice consciousness in the Church.

Despite the fact that Pope Gregory XVI in 1838 condemned slavery, wealthy Catholic families, some bishops, and some male and female Catholic religious orders own slaves. The Supreme Court’s decision (1864)—which holds that slaves have no rights—was written by Chief Justice Roger Taney, a Catholic.

A lost opportunity. One year after the Civil War ends, the American Catholic bishops meet in Baltimore to discuss the state of the Church. Archbishop Spalding of Baltimore points out that there are about four million freed blacks in the United States. Many have no religion and would welcome an opportunity to become Catholic. Spalding wants the Church to make a major effort to evangelize these emancipated slaves. “It’s a golden opportunity,” he says, “which, if neglected, may never come again.” Sadly, few, if any, of the bishops show much interest in the proposal, and Spalding’s words turn out to be true. One reason the bishops have turned a deaf ear to Spalding’s plea is because they are overwhelmed trying to respond to the millions of Catholics pouring in from Europe.

Missed Opportunity

Around the mid-1800, there were around 4,000 freed black slaves in America. Church leaders, because of their preoccupation with the large numbers of European immigrants, did very little to evangelize these brothers and sisters.

To assimilate or not to assimilate - Americanism

The question of whether or not the Catholic Church should assimilate into the American way of life creates great tension in the Catholic Church in America in the late nineteenth century. Pushing for assimilation are several leading Irish clergy, such as Archbishop Ireland of St. Paul, Minnesota, and Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore. In 1894, Ireland states: “*There is no conflict between the Catholic Church and America. The principles of the Church are thoroughly in harmony with the Republic.*” Also, churchmen like Spalding believe it in the best interest of American Catholics to develop good relations with Protestants who are the majority and hold most of the political power. Another voice pushing for the Catholic Church to assimilate into the American culture is Isaac Hecker (1819-1888), a convert to Catholicism and founder of the Missionary Priests of St. Paul (Paulists), an order committed to the conversion of Protestant America. For this to happen, Hecker believes that the Catholic Church has to be unreservedly American. Those pushing for the

Church to assimilate into the American way of life become known as “Americanizers.”

But other leaders in the Church are opposed to the Americanization of Catholicism. Especially against are German Catholics who do not speak English and who very much want to maintain their German customs and way of life. Archbishop Corrigan of New York and many Jesuits also oppose the Americanization of the Church. These leaders believe that uncritical over-identification with the American way of life would lead to a weakening of Catholic identity and beliefs.

Rome intervenes. When word gets to Rome about the assimilation battle occurring in the New Republic, Pope Leo XIII becomes worried for two reasons: (1) Would the move to Americanize the Church lead to a dilution of Catholic beliefs? (2) Given that many officials in Rome still mistrust the American democratic style, would it lead to the democratization of the Church?

In 1899, Pope Leo writes a Letter, *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae* (Witness to our Good Will) to Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore, expressing his concerns over what he has heard about the attempts to Americanize Catholicism. In *Testem*, Leo XII states:

The underlying principle of these new opinions is that, in order to more easily attract those who differ from her, the Church should shape her teachings more in accord with the spirit of the age and relax some of her ancient severity and make some concessions to new opinions. Many think that these concessions should be made not only in regard to ways of living, but even in regard to doctrines which belong to the deposit of the faith. They contend that it would be opportune, in order to gain those who differ from us, to omit certain points of her teaching which are of lesser importance and to tone down the meaning which the Church has always attached to them.

Leo’s Letter also discourages any attempts to cozy up to Protestants who are still looked upon as heretics in Rome. In response to *Testem*, Cardinal Gibbons assures the pope that American Catholics do not hold the views that are causing him much concern.

When the Mayor of New York tells the bishop that there will be violence if Catholics defend their property, the bishop tells the mayor to tell the anti-Catholic bigots that there will be blood in the streets if they attack his churches and schools.

Strong Church leaders

During the 1800’s, the Catholic Church in America has been blessed with some very strong Church leaders. They are mostly Irish since the first wave of immigrants in the 1800’s were from Ireland. The following are two of the best known bishops:

Archbishop “Dagger” John Hughes (1797-1864) was born in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, where he experiences firsthand the oppression of Catholics by Protestants. When his sister dies as a teenager, a priest is not allowed to enter the graveyard to say Catholic prayers. John’s first job in America is as a gardener at Mount St. Mary’s Seminary in Emmetsburg, Maryland. He asks the rector, Fr. Dubois, if he could enter the seminary. Dubois turns him down, unable to see past his lack of education. (John will later succeed Fr. Dubois as Bishop of New York.)

Providentially, John meets Mother Seton, also an immigrant. Upon her recommendation, John enters the seminary, and in 1826 is ordained a priest for the diocese of Philadelphia. Following are some of his accomplishments:

- During the 1834 cholera epidemic, which the Nativists blame on the Irish immigrants, Fr. Hughes works tirelessly amongst the sick and the dying while most clergy flee the city to escape the infection.

- When Catholics are being attacked by Protestant ministers and politicians, Fr. John does not remain silent. He is determined that the Irish in the New

World are not to be treated as second-class citizens as they had been in his native Ireland. So he starts to fire off letters to local newspapers in defense of Catholics, which leads to a public debate with a very prominent Protestant clergyman. The Catholic priest performs so well that he soon becomes a national celebrity with American Irish. Not long after, Fr. Dubois, now Bishop of New York falls ill. Hughes, at 40 years of age, is appointed his coadjutor bishop.

- When Bishop Hughes hears that anti-Catholic bigots are planning attacks on Catholic churches and schools in New

York, he arms Catholic men and stations them on the grounds of his parishes. When the Mayor of New York tells the bishop that there will be violence if

Catholics defend their property, the bishop tells the mayor to tell the anti-Catholic bigots that there will be blood in the streets if they attack his churches and schools.

- Bishop Hughes stirs up a huge battle over the treatment of Catholic children in the public school system, which essentially is a private Protestant organization. It teaches Protestantism and uses the Protestant Bible. When Hughes asks the state to fund Catholic schools, it decides in 1842 to bar all religious instruction from public schools and to provide no state money to religious schools. Having partially reformed the public schools to save Catholics who attend them from proselytism, the bishop now throws all his energy into promoting Catholic schools. He believes that a solid education is the way out of poverty.

- In 1845, Bishop Hughes faces his biggest challenge when millions of Irish come to New York as a result of the Great Famine. For years, the famine victims live in terrible poverty. Alcoholism, crime and prostitution are widespread. In those years, the Irish are looked upon as the criminal and depraved element in New York City. But 30 to 40 years later, through the efforts of the now Archbishop Hughes, his priests, and especially the nuns, the Irish will become the pillars of the criminal justice system. Three quarters of the police force are Irish. The Irish are also prosecutors, judges and the jailers.

- Archbishop Hughes serves as a counselor to Presidents, and in 1847 addresses Congress on the role of Christians in preserving American political institutions.

- Aware of the future greatness of New York City, Archbishop Hughes lays the cornerstone of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Cardinal James Gibbons (1834-1921). Son of Irish immigrants, James Gibbons has been the Archbishop of America's primate see of Baltimore for over 40 years. He presides over the hugely important *Third Plenary Council of Baltimore* in 1884, which produces the famous *Baltimore Catechism*, and he mandates that every parish should have a Catholic school. The Cardinal's considerable diplomatic skills and Irish charm help to calm many tense situations.

- He persuades Pope Leo XIII to lift the ban on the *Knights of Labor*, an organization whose aim is to protect and promote the rights of working people. This accomplishment of his wins the hearts of Catholic workers in America.

- He is very instrumental in calming Rome's fears about the Americanization of the Catholic Church.

- He calms many a storm arising between ethnic parishes.

- He allays Protestant fears as regards the growing strength of the Catholic parochial system.

- He does much to integrate great waves of immigrants into American society and is a strong defender of the poor.

The fiftieth anniversary of his priestly ordination attracts about 20,000 people, including Presidents Teddy Roosevelt and William Taft. Roosevelt tells the Cardinal: "Taking your life as a whole, I think you now occupy the position of being the most respected and venerated and useful citizen of our country." Upon his death, Cardinal Gibbons is mourned by the nation.

Katherine Drexel (1858-1955) was born into a very wealthy but devout Catholic family in Philadelphia. Upon her father's death, Katherine inherits about \$7million. While on a European tour, she meets Pope Leo XIII and asks him to send missionaries to her friend Bishop O'Connor to work amongst the Indian people, to which the pope replies: "Why don't you become a missionary?" His answer propels her into considering new possibilities.

This leads to the founding of a new religious order—the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament—whose focus is the education of Indians and Colored Americans.

By 1942, Katherine runs a system of Black Catholic schools in 13 states, plus 40 mission centers and 23 rural schools in Pennsylvania. Segregationists harass her work, even burning a school.

Katherine also establishes 50 missions for Native Americans in 16 states. Her crowning achievement is the founding of Xavier University in New Orleans,

St. Katherine Drexel founds a religious order whose focus is the education of Indians and colored Americans. By the time she retires due to a heart attack, Katherine has established a large number of schools for Black Catholics and for Indians. She also founded the only African American University.

the first Catholic university in the United States for African Americans.

At 75, Katherine suffers a heart attack and is forced to retire. She will spend the next 19 years in quiet, intense prayer in a small room. She dies at 96 and is canonized in 2000. Katherine once said: *“The patient and humble endurance of the cross—whatever nature it may be—is the highest work we have to do.”*

Reflection questions

1. What spoke to you most in this Article?
2. What, if anything surprised you, confused you or shocked you?
3. If you had lived in that era of American Church history, would you have voted to assimilate or not assimilate?
4. Do you think our Church today needs more leaders like Archbishop Hughes, Cardinal Gibbons and Katherine Drexel?