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"THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC  
TRADITION"

*The Enrichment of  
National Life*

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THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CATHOLIC MEN

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## The Enrichment of National Life

The Church exists to lead men to eternal life. In the course of fulfilling this mission, it also civilizes and enriches this life on earth. No American Catholic would hesitate to claim that the Church has enriched the whole life of his country. He would like to think that his neighbors would be ready to accept that fact as evidently true. But the same Catholic would probably be unable to agree with some of his fellow Catholics on just what the areas of enrichment are.

It is obvious that in the field of education the Catholic contribution has been and continues to be a great one. It is difficult to imagine what would happen to public elementary and even high school facilities in very many American communities if Catholics ceased suddenly to support their own. Similarly, in the field of social work, at least in a great many parts of the United States, it is almost impossible to think of it without the Catholic program of hospitals and clinics, of homes and other child-care and old-age institutions, of nurseries and visiting nurses, of family services, of youth



counseling and youth centers and camps. More than all this, the Catholic social work philosophy has strengthened all voluntary organizations of philanthropy against the possible encroachment by any all-powerful state which might monopolize concern with cases of human suffering that are problems of both body and soul.

Perhaps the church's alleviating or even pacifying function in American society has at times been exaggerated. It was often said in the late nineteenth century that the Church was a bulwark, particularly among the poor, against the influences of anarchism and socialism and their attempts to root their radicalism within the masses. Similarly, in this century the figure of some kind of protective wall rather than of anything like a socially dynamic force against the inroads of communism has often been used. Even in more general terms, American Catholicism has often been criticized especially by European Catholics as too safe and sound, too conservative and middle class, too comfortable and cautious. Again, the secular setting in which it has developed has undoubtedly influenced the pattern of the Church's life. For most Americans, nonetheless, a force conducive to the stability of society would be considered an enriching one. Moreover, the course

of history has demonstrated the American Church's influence against Communism. It is practically universally recognized, despite some occasional misgivings on methods employed, as a major Catholic contribution to American life. This anti-communism is nothing more than a continuation of a tradition of devotion to American political institutions plus an unwavering awareness of the anti-God philosophy at the basis of that hostile system. One simple fact is that no Catholics, of either low-or higher class background, have figured in spy cases or treason trials in modern America.

Like any other cultural minority group Catholics in the United States have often exaggerated their contribution. Together with the Negro section of the population they sometime seem more zealous to correct the Protestant-New England version of what has happened only in America. The search for the first to have done something of consequence, the counting of all Irish names on Revolutionary War lists as Catholic ones, or even the tolerance of legends of great Americans who were crypto-Catholics-such things certainly are not unique to Catholics. Three decades ago it was easy to compile a cooperative work in five volumes on the theme of Catholic builders of the nation.

The times indeed have changed and sophistication has found its place. For many Catholics today the emphasis is on acknowledging that during the long brick-and-mortar period of providing for necessities the Church in the United States made no great enrichment of American intellectual and cultural life. History shows that this came, in part, from the influence of the American environment on a less than welcomed group as well as a lack of a transplanted substantial tradition for such interests. Fewer excuses are being made now and so intellectual sloth as well as pride is being condemned from Catholic pulpits. The whereabouts of Catholic artists and writers whose numbers fall so short of the substantial proportion in law or medicine is today a matter of concern. The existence since the war of a Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural affairs is a major symptom of the new outlook among American Catholic scholars who one hundred years ago were merely a handful and a hope in number, and forty years ago hardly exceeded three dozen, but today, when grouped with creative artists, make up a group of over 250 and they are still counting themselves.

Many great additions to American Catholic scholarly circles have come from abroad. In that fact there is a hint of a

a continued great enrichment of American life which is found in the Church. It has been not only a link with the past, which at times has been made into an over-romanticized and obstructive connection, but it has been a means of communication with modern Western Europe. In its parishes and convents of men and women were heard the French of the emigres of the revolution or the German of the exiles of 1848. Later from the Ukraine, or Lithuania, Italy, Hungary and throughout Europe came other Catholics. From French Canada and Spanish America they have come across the borders too. They all brought their languages and cultures but they preserved them particularly through their churches. This fact is perhaps more appreciated today than when the melting pot of America was supposed to be making some new kind of blend of all arrivals, new and old. In today's world these links with other lands and cultures serve America well. This was true even in a more formal manner in the nineteenth century when a priest might be the only one available to instruct an interested American scholar in a foreign language or even, as in the case of Portugese, to introduce its formal study to American schools. Yet American Catholics of earlier arrival have always

insisted that they were also easing the transition to Americanization of their more recent fellows from Europe. This dual function of saving and yet accommodating was not a process that was achieved without difficulties and misunderstandings. One hallmark of success in that kind of integration came at the turn of the century when for the first time all kind of Catholic organizations of diverse ethnic backgrounds were federated on a national level.

There were two groups within the United States in the last century with which the Church concerned itself in a special way, the Indian and the Negro. The directions their histories have followed have been quite diverse. In the eighteen-seventies the implementing of President Grant's policy of allotting Indian reservations to various American religious groups hardly gave Catholics their fair share. Today nonetheless however there are over 117,000, or one third of the total Indian population in the United States and Canada, who are Catholic. This gives the Church a good part of the burden of rectifying the debt owed to Uncle Sam's long-neglected step-children. It does this through almost one thousand dedicated mission workers both religious and lay.



The case of the freed slaves was a very different one. A hundred years ago was a long time from the days when being a priest's slave in eighteenth century Maryland was the same as having a name for being well-treated. There were Catholic negroes, of course, in southern Maryland and in even greater numbers in Louisiana. Emancipation, even before the war split the nation, saw some of them among the settlers of Liberia in the eighteen-forties. At Rome's directive two Irish priests went out to serve in Africa and became the continent's first contact with American Catholicism. Meanwhile the freed Catholic negroes in the United States were not unaware of the Holy See's concern for them. In the eighteen-fifties a group of such faithful in New York City wrote to Rome petitioning that other priests should be inspired to as great a devotion to their welfare as was displayed by the then Father John Loughlin, who was to be the first Bishop of Brooklyn.

As a matter of fact it could be maintained that it has been precisely through direction from the Church's center that the Catholic contribution to the American integration picture has been achieved. This is not to say that there was not always individual zeal for the negro's welfare. In the decade of the eighteen-

twenties a community of negro nuns had been formed in Baltimore, the Oblate Sisters, who still continue to serve their people through Christian education. A plaque on the wall of the cathedral of Cork City in Ireland commemorates John England, a priest of that diocese, and singles out his work for the education of the negroes. He was almost mobbed for his interest in them while he was bishop of Charleston in the eighteen-thirties. Yet Catholics avoided at least the more severe forms of the abolitionist controversy. In 1866 after the defeat of the South when the Bishops gathered to face their special problems of reconstruction they avoided setting up special jurisdictions for the freed negroes in the South. This had been proposed but, fortunately for the future, was voted down. Rome would most probably never have tolerated it. The real negro missionary endeavor was to be stimulated from outside by the Mill Hill Fathers of England after the eighteen-seventies, but only in the eighteen-nineties, with the American groups such as the Josephite priests and the Blessed Sacrament sisters was that special apostolate given impetus. Rome was ever watchful and early in the twentieth century demanded reassurance from the American hierarchy that Catholic negroes

were not getting any second-rate treatment.

The fact, of course, was that in most respects at that time the American negro was still treated as a second-class citizen. One of the prophets of America's great challenge of its future democracy was John Boyle O'Reilly, who wrote of the negro problem in such terms in the Boston *Pilot* of the eighteen-eighties. At that same time Archbishop John Ireland addressed gatherings of the Negro Catholic congresses along similar lines. The challenge however did not begin to be met completely until the nineteen-thirties. Then, in the nation's capitol, the Catholic University of America returned to a policy of integration that it had begun in its first days, in the nineties. One of its professors, Father Francis Aaas, became first head of the Federal Fair Employment Practices Committee. It was a well-known fact that the influence of Archbishop Amleto Cicognani, over a period of a quarter of a century as Apostolic Delegate to the United States, was quietly but strongly used in support of such programs as that of the interracial councils. Some few martyrs to the Catholic cause of integration fell quietly in the ranks of clergy and religious but nonetheless the Church was in the vanguard of the movement. Sometimes unnoticed, as in the Archdiocese of

Washington after 1947, and other times with publicity and even after appeals by laymen to Rome, the bishops led their flocks to a fuller meaning of the Gospels in twentieth century America.

The secularist American mind is perhaps more impressed with the church's work for interracial justice than by any other aspect of its enrichment of American life. No matter how many other factors can be introduced as explanation, no matter if in some it evokes a dread of such Roman power rather than an appreciation of Roman adherence to principle, the Catholic record on integration stands in a unique light. This is not to say that American Catholics have yet purged themselves of all sinful prejudices. But negro priests and religious are growing in number and, more important, are rarely singled out in terms of their number. A further enrichment along these lines will mean also a greater flowering of Catholicism.

As America's public morals have changed the Church has been secure in its adherence to the age-old Faith. The principles that regulate family life have especially been adverted to time and time again as sources of the religious and national strength. It was in 1837 that the bishops spoke for the first time in a na-

tional pastoral letter to the faithful on the religious man's obligation to his family. It was in terms of his responsibilities, as the bishops put it, "of guarding their health, of providing for their wants, of promoting their interest, of securing their property, of watching over their education, of superintending their discipline, of cultivating their minds, of regulating their morals, of winning their hearts to the love of virtue, and of leading them by his example in the path of heaven." Such simple and straightforward admonitions to good family life were to be repeated often in many and more elaborate forms. With them went additional warnings against divorce and other growing factors in the weakening of American family life.

There was and is no typical American Catholic family. Those of the early immigrant days are more mixed into the general population. Many of the more recently arrived national groups, especially in the smaller cities and towns, still keep alive something of the old world's family life.

Family praying, however, has become popular again in Catholic circles of all kinds of backgrounds. Catholics often find it difficult to resist the predominant patterns of marriage behavior in a society which makes but nodding deference to the appearance of being a Christian

society. Accordingly to strengthen them in their resolves for the past fifteen years there has been growing a movement called the Cana Conference — after the place where Christ attended the wedding and performed his first miracle. Every year in about one hundred dioceses about one hundred thousand persons find or renew the ideals of Christian marriage through this means. In Catholic colleges and high schools, too, thousands more are prepared in special courses for good family living. This is a modern program that needs no defense as an obvious methodical means of enriching the national life. In simpler times the Church has fostered good family life by simpler means.

More difficult for many Americans to appreciate is perhaps the presence of Catholic contemplatives in the United States. More attention has been attracted to them by the great growth of the Trappist monks in the period since the war. Their dozen monasteries in various parts of the country are monuments to a rounded vision of Catholicism which did not come all at once, even to American Catholics. As early as 1814 a feast-day procession of Trappists could have been seen on the streets of New York City during the time a small group of monks had a brief stay there. It was only in 1848 that the Kentucky establishment really took root,

yet for a hundred years the Trappists were hardly noticeable and even a bit of a puzzlement to their coreligionists. The pragmatic spirit of a growing America did not seem to make it a land hospitable to those who were seeking God directly through prayer combined with simple manual labor. The Poor Clare Sisters were not very welcome in eighteenth-seventies and it was only a tradition-minded Archbishop Michael A. Corrigan of New York who introduced the cloistered Dominican nuns into his archdiocese in the eighteen-eighties.

The retreat movement among lay people has been somewhat related to the growth of these holy islands of silence, the cloisters, in America. Retreats for women were introduced in the eighteenth-nineties by the French sisters called the Society of Our Lady of the Cenacle. Since the first years of this century most religious orders of men have also encouraged this movement. Today about 300,000 men and 100,000 women annually retire for at least a few days of directed silent prayer and thought in hundreds of centers throughout the United States. The enrichment of American life even by these weekend contemplatives is, again, something that cannot be gauged. Apart from the contribution in mental health such retreats can hardly be appreciated fully without the eyes of faith. Yet hundreds

of non-Catholics also participate in this particular part of American Catholic life, which one might have expected to be furthest from their appreciation.

The restoration or renewal of the official prayer life of the Church, known as the liturgical movement, has not perhaps had as much internal influence. Yet American taste for ceremonial religion certainly has grown. Official emphasis on the liturgy is as old as the Church in America, for Archbishop Carroll favored a greater use of English in the Mass and in the administration of the sacraments. Similarly, Bishop England, through an edition of a missal that remained popular for a good part of the last century, made the mass prayers more accessible to all! The state of Church music in general was as much deplored a hundred years ago as it is by some critics today. At one time, a hymn was even arranged to the melody of the popular "Last Rose of Summer." Nonetheless the movement for the restoration of the Gregorian chant in Church music was under way by the eighties. This has been accomplished to a great extent in America, although the spreading of that musical blessing never seems to be finished.

It is in more popular ways that the prayer life of the Church would seem to have had a visibly enriching effect on America. As late as the eighteen-



seventies it was not unusual for New England mill town to be working full force on Christmas Day. Even less observed in the American way was Good Friday, or a commemoration of Lent or even of Holy Week. Today these old Christian observances that were kept alive in the Catholic traditions transplanted to America are once again becoming a more general inheritance. Meanwhile Catholics are becoming more aware that the American Protestant tradition has preserved better than their own some valuable Christian traditions, such as hymns of good quality. Only in this country could Christmas carols cease to belong to any national or even particular religious tradition and become part of a common cultural observance.

Many other Catholic contributions to American culture might be claimed and well defended. Convent school training for young ladies and Jesuit training for young men are certainly among them. Catholics as traditionalism in education have for the most part stayed with the study of solid subject courses in their schools. The revival of the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas which has won a respectable position in American academic circles was a contribution which began in the last years of the nineteenth century.

Educated Catholics often talk its language in relation not only to religion but also to law or ethics or even esthetics.

Obviously, for most non-Catholics Americans, whether they are friendly in their dispositions towards the Church or not, the Catholic Church is known through more appearances or perhaps some particular experience, something read, a priest met, or maybe an institution visited. In consequence they may see the Church's doctrine and moral code as an intellectual noose rather than a voluntary way of life which has produced saintly people even in America. They may see the Church as a mere pressure group for its own ideas rather than the pentecostal extension of Christ. They may not think the Church has enriched American life in the ways of Faith and Grace which are to Catholics the essential enrichment. Their Catholic neighbors pray that as they themselves strive to grow in appreciation of the inner meaning of the Church, all of their fellow countrymen may see at least that the presence of the Faith in America has been an influence for great good, that it has meant for all a civilizing and spiritualizing force in the new world in ways that are the same yet different from those in the old.

A final enrichment of America might

be seen in the dedication of American Catholics to Mary the Mother of God. Her new shrine in Washington will add to the artistic and architectural enrichment that came with Latrobe's old cathedral in Baltimore, with the classic St. Peter's in Cincinnati, or with the revived Gothic of New York's St. Patrick's.

Yet the shrine of the Immaculate Conception will sing Mary's glories only in stone as they have so often before been sung in the lives of her children.

Certainly our country's heavenly patroness has enriched American life by being the model of virtue to all American women young and old who have lived under her protecting mantle.

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