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NOTES ON CATHOLIC IMMIGRANTS AND PARISH SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES¹

1. The origins of American Catholicism

The Catholic Church experienced its first phase of large expansion in the United States only in the second half of the Nineteenth Century. Until that moment, Catholic people had been excluded from the early American history events, keeping a marginal position in those territories that would eventually become the great North American power. The British colonisation of North America had been carried out following two main patterns: Northern colonies were created to meet the land needs of radical Protestant immigrants – such as the Pilgrim Fathers – and became therefore “Protestant experiments,”² where Catholics enjoyed no rights to citizenship. Southern colonies, on the other hand, were a product of British mercantilism politics, which favoured the Anglican Church's integration in the gradually settled areas.³

This two-way original process is also the reason behind the political and cultural differences in the British colonial world in North America. The South, governed by merchants aligned to their rulers and uninterested in religious matters, and the North, animated by political and social issues, inspired by faith and by the aim of founding a New World from an eschatological point of view. An intermediate region existed in the middle, composed of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Rhode Island, creating a socially and religiously complex buffer area, where monarchists, Anglicans, and Puritans could peacefully coexist.

Only the Calverts – members of a noble British Catholic family – succeeded in founding a Catholic colony named Maryland after Queen Henriette Marie. The British colonists' repulsion toward Catholics was nevertheless higher than that toward radical Protestants, and a strong anti-Catholic feeling pervaded all the colonies surrounding Maryland. This is why the Calverts had to manage political and religious matters of their colony making sure not to disappoint their neighbours.

As the historian James Hennesey wrote, the Calverts bid their colonisers that “all the Roman Catholics [remained] in silence in every discussion regarding religion and [treated] Protestants with as much kindness and favour as justice allowed” (Hennesey 1985, 64). Consistently with these instructions, no religious reference was mentioned in the propaganda that Maryland founders put in place to recruit aspiring colonisers in England in 1632 (Bailyn and Wood 69).

The Catholic part of colonial society remained therefore very limited and it didn't grow after the Revolution, at least not until the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. During the Eighteenth Century, despite the spread of religious tolerance and freedom principles across North America, inspiring also the constituents and the writers of the *Bill of Rights*, anti-Catholicism was still a widespread sentiment.⁴ Intolerance toward Catholics

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² Tiziano Bonazzi called these colonies a portion of a larger sacred experiment: “America for [the Puritans and Pilgrims] was not a desert, but a place free from the influence and the obligations, a sort of incubator, therefore, for the people of Christ and his ‘Holy experiment’, a set aside spot and therefore, visible to everyone, where the biblical ‘city upon a hill’ could shine in all its light to drag Europe to the rescue against the Antichrist” (Bonazzi, 1971, 33).

³ See also Harvey and Blum, Corona and Del Bello, Dolan, Corona (61-75), Guatier, Dolan (1992), Sanfilippo (2003), Bercovitch, Bailyn, Hennesey (1981 and 1985), Ahlstrom, Spini, Baritz.

⁴ See also: Sanfilippo (2000), Foner, Greeley (1977a, 1977b).



was then fuelled by the mounting conflict between the colonists and the British Crown, since the latter had decided to seek support and loyalty right amid the Catholic Church, which became even more hateful on the part of the Americans (Sanfilippo 2003, 31).

The Revolution had nevertheless resulted in the strengthening of Catholic existence in the United States, since it was after this event that the Vatican was forced to begin a process of institutionalisation of the Church in the Country. Until 1773, North American Catholic missions depended on a “spiritual guide,” John Lewis, who was the last Jesuit superior to act on behalf of the vicar apostolic of London (Hennesey 1985, 101-102). In the political scenery created after the end of the Revolution, it was clearly impossible for Catholic missions to report either to the London vicariate or to the dioceses or the bishop of Quebec, who were all under British rule. In 1784 John Carroll was then appointed the first supervisor of the United States mission and this started a process of institutionalisation. Five years later he would become Bishop of Baltimore, the first to guide a community which at that time counted almost 30,000 devotees.

2. American Catholicism and migrations

At the turn of the twentieth century, migrations toward the United States spurred the expansion of Catholicism in the Country – initially moderate but steady. Though of the 24,000 new migrants arrived in 1794 only a small part was Catholic, this low percentage contributed to the growth of the existing Catholics on the territory, forcing Baltimore's Bishop to found the first seminaries and Catholic schools. Those institutions were created with the aim of instructing future priests and the future ruling class, loyal to the Church (Shaughnessy). This was necessary, since clerical figures formed in Europe were not prepared to deal with the situation of the Country (De Paolis).

The creation of institutes and private schools made the regulation of the relation between the Church and the State indispensable in order to define the legal framework within which the clergy would administer the property of the Church. The matter was debated in the synod of Baltimore in 1779, which established the institution of *Trustees Corporations*, a typical Protestant structure, through which all the members of a community or of a congregation shared the properties of the church. Bishop Carroll thought the system was suitable also for the local Catholic Church, given its specific historical and political situation (Corecco).

As a consequence of the introduction of this system, though, the parish *Trustees* had a very strong control over their properties, handling and managing them as if these “didn't depend on the diocesan authorities, but belonged to the parishioners, who had financed the construction of the temple and guaranteed a living to the priest” (Sanfilippo 2003, 38). As a result, parishes developed a tendency to decentralisation and autonomy, aiming at self-management and choice of their own prelates, who started to be considered employees of the community, liable to be sent away in case they didn't reflect the desires, costumes, and feelings of the congregation.

The choice of the *Trustees Corporation* institution was one of the main causes of the birth of linguistic parishes when the rapid increase in migration flows brought to the United States millions of Catholics from Europe within a few decades. The slightly more than 300,000 Catholics in the Country at the end of the 1820s became more than 6,200,000 in 1880, showing an increase of 950% in half a century. The Catholic migrants were mostly workers from the socio-economically depressed regions of Europe: the first migration waves brought Irish and German migrants, then, during the last decades of the Nineteenth Century, migrants started to come also from Southern and Eastern Europe, particularly from Italy and Poland (Juliani, Rosoli, Dolan 1975, Tommasi, Fecher).

3. Towards linguistic parishes

Most Catholic immigrants lived in a few large cities and tended to settle in the same neighbourhoods, dividing and gathering according to their nationality. In those places, immigrants organised themselves following their own social models, based on communities neatly defined by the religious beliefs and the language of their members. The networks of familiar relationships and political influence tangibly determined the functioning of the cities.

Finding themselves in an unknown environment, the immigrants felt the impulse to create profitable connections with their countrymen, to develop mutual help associations at work, and to establish structures aimed at the education of children and the safeguard of traditions. Moreover, thanks to the *spoils system*,



local political and electoral machines channeled the votes of the community toward a single party and the support of its candidates. The reward consisted in job opportunities in the various branches of municipal administration. In doing so, migrant communities acquired the function of assistance and protection, aimed at the integration of the inhabitants into a community able to provide not only the necessary help in difficult situations, but also facilitating communication with the rest of the community and interaction with the *Establishment* (Luconi and Barone, Bergamini, Luconi, Jacobson, Ignatiev).

Parishes had a central position in these social networks and their role soon became that of strengthening the traits that represented national peculiarities. For this reason, parishes differed greatly as far as activities and costumes are concerned. *Trustees Corporations* became the instrument for the struggle to claim autonomy in the hands of community heads and against Church hierarchies whenever these attempted to impose unwelcome rules (Sanfilippo 2007).

In this framework the Irish Catholics were the first national community to gain a prominent role in the North American Church. As the historian Jay P. Dolan wrote:

The Irish came in such numbers, and so did Irish clergymen, that most parishes in the Northeast became staffed by Irish priests, most parish school were taught by Irish women, and much of the upper leadership of the church was Irish. The Irish came to dominate the church so completely that then, and even today in some places, a parish that had no particular national association was referred to as the 'Irish' church. (Dolan 1987, 9)

The Irish represented the minority that was more prone to "Americanisation," the process of social and cultural integration required by society and the United States ruling class to the migrants who intended to remain in the Country. To complete the process of Americanisation, they didn't have to deal with the linguistic gap all other nationalities had to struggle with. The growth of the importance of the Irish community in the Church had also been favoured by the Vatican which, during the first years of Catholic presence in the United States, had given the possibility to take the first, defining decisions regarding the structure of the Church, to prelates such as Carroll, Hughes, England, and Kenrich, all of Irish origin (Corecco 182).

Later German migrants also acquired an important position, although resisting total integration: German Catholicism bequeathed deep cultural roots with the language, which was the most important means to preserve identity and faith. Therefore, despite having conquered a substantial stand in North American Church, German people chose to maintain a strong connection with their idiom and their culture, a decision that prevented them from becoming leaders of United States Catholicism (Rosoli 26-27).

At the beginning, it was thanks to the Germans that the language could be part of the claims presented to the leaders of the Catholic hierarchy in the United States. Immigrants demanded the creation of linguistic parishes, refusing the imposed centralisation of a liturgical and administrative use of the English language. The leaders of the dioceses tried to meet these requests by means of multilingual priests, particularly in areas that included various nationalities, such as New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. However, the *Trustees* also demanded that their priests belonged to their nationality and spoke their language (Rosoli 26-27). As highlighted by the historian Matteo Sanfilippo, it took a struggling process against the initial reticence of Vatican hierarchies to reach the desired results:

These claims and behaviours were blamed for a long time by the Holy See, which had always considered ethnic fragmentation as a danger, given that this fragmentation seemed to derive from that nationalism which, according to Roman functionaries of the Nineteenth Century, had ended the ancient regime and cancelled the traditional alliance between the throne and the altar, besides being in open contrast with the universality of the Christian teaching. Nevertheless, managing parishes with a strong ethnic majority, meant the growing usage of same nationality-clergymen: it would have been useless to engage in a long and strenuous struggle with the immigrants of a certain group, when it would have been much easier to assign them a priest who could speak their language. (Sanfilippo 2007, 995)



The inner tensions of the Church weren't the only issue in the Catholic community, which also had to deal with conflicts with the rest of society, due to ancient anti-Catholic prejudices and to the xenophobic waves that followed the landing of millions of immigrants. Starting from the 1870s, the intensity of the conflicts grew after the arrival of new immigrants, the deprived inhabitants of Southern and Eastern Europe, particularly Italians and Poles: their impact on the cities of the United States had tragic consequences. Masses of poor people, usually farmers in their Countries, had to fight for admission to the lowest rungs of the social ladder. They lived in crowded *tenements* and brought to the United States their ways of living, substantially transforming the face of the cities. With their arrival and settlement, they triggered the growing resentment and strong resistance of the native population, facilitating the rebirth of xenophobic organisations, based on the principles of Nativism, as the American Protective Association, an anti-Catholic secret society founded in 1887.⁵

For this reason, also Irish and German Catholics began to oppose the arrival of new migrants, since the religious habits of the latter were deeply different from those that had developed in the North American Catholic world, under Irish, German and French-Canadian influence. The rural religiosity of Southern and Eastern European immigrants was considered by many in the United States as a medley of pagan beliefs, magical practices, doctrines, and liturgies in which the cult of patron saints was the strongest emotional connection among the immigrants themselves.

Tensions in the parishes grew rapidly: this happened in Chicago, for example, where at the beginning of the Twentieth Century the Irish had control over the Church during the same period in which the city was the third "Pole city" in the World, after Warsaw and Łódź. Difficulties with the German people, who had acquired important roles in the ecclesiastical structure, weren't less intense. Nevertheless, though it would be wrong to talk about a Church that was hospitable and welcoming with Catholics of every nationality, it is also necessary to reject the stereotype of a Church totally led by an almost completely Irish ecclesiastical hierarchy, aspiring at imposing its ideas and models of faith. After careful analysis, "what emerges is a complex picture of the Church in America, seeking to prove its "American-ness" and at the same time called upon to incorporate within itself the most foreign cultural, linguistic and religious elements" (Dyrud, Novak and Vecoli).

4. The Church and its schools: a way towards Americanization

The new immigrants had to struggle on different fronts, in order to gain recognition and legitimation in all areas of life and in public spaces. On one hand, they sought integration in a distant and hostile society such as the United States one was for them; on the other hand they also had to argue in the Church. Americanisation was one of the goals of the Church, but the Church itself had to face and solve the conflicts arisen from the Americanisation attempts of Catholic minorities recently arrived in the Country. In order to reach this objective, the Plenary Council of Baltimore, held in 1852, decided to provide the Church of the United States with some tools: seminaries; Diocesan Consultors; Curia's Officials responsible for solving the problem of the relationship between the clergy and the bishops, and the parish schools.

The parish – the place where the new ecclesiastical model had been developed – was able to strengthen its role. The functions it fulfilled became more complex. As already shown, parishes initially had represented a means of identification for the Catholics, a place of self-defence and differentiation in a Protestant Country. Parishes were born because of the pressing needs of immigrants who had no points of reference, linguistically and religiously speaking. Having developed as linguistic parishes, they had soon become centres of association for groups with common origins. Following their quantitative increase and the new problems deriving from the proliferation of national groups and their conflicts, parishes were now acquiring a new and opposite function, imposed by the need of homogenisation and inclusion. As a matter of fact, if all Catholic immigrants wanted to integrate and contribute to solving the conflicts, they had to adjust to local habits and behaviours. Parishes became an instrument to complete this process. As Jay P. Dolan wrote: "Despite so many differences in ethnicity and culture, all of these newcomers to America had one thing in common – they entered the American mainstream through the medium of the Catholic parish" (Dolan 1987, 9). Adjusting to the United States mainstream entailed education to the practices, the sociality, the duties,

⁵ See also: Vecoli (1992 and 2005) Guglielmo and Salerno, Luconi (2001), Quarles, Jacobson, Ignatiev, Daniels, Higham (1955 and 1975) and Desmond.



and the culture of the Country, something that was perceived to imply abandoning national characterisations and a process to which the parishes too had to contribute (Walch; Carper and Hunt).

In this framework, parish schools played a significant role. However, those institutions maintained a dual profile, on account of the irresolvable tension between inclusion and distinction that animated the communities which created them. Born as tools for the process of Americanisation, parish schools also highlighted the need for differentiation from the United States mainstream that the Catholics felt.⁶

Through its private schools, the United State Church aimed at keeping all Catholic immigrants within boundaries tolerable for American society. It drew the margins of behaviour and way of living that Catholics should not overstep in order to preserve their uniqueness and not merge with the Protestant world. In this context, parish schools have represented “part of a strategy to pass on the faith to the next generation in the context of a relatively hostile surrounding culture” (Froehle and Gautier 63).

The United States school system was based on ideals of separation between Church and State and freedom of conscience, therefore the *common schools* in the Country weren't denominational and, from the point of view of the *establishment*, they could be attended by any religious group whatsoever. Usually a distinction was made between religious and moral education, where the former was considered partial and the latter universal; therefore, according to supporters of the public school system, “the State intended to give a ‘secular’ and moral but not a religious education; the State did not intend to give a sectarian education, and this was precisely what Reverend Hughes intended to give” (Lannie 80).

Catholics had a completely different opinion: they considered public schools as courses in Protestantism. First and foremost, during school hours, their children wouldn't use the Bible in its Catholic commented version, but the King James Version, which Protestants considered neutral. More generally, Catholics found the text books used in those schools controversial. Besides, a high percentage of the teachers working in those schools saw Catholicism as an obsolete or even depraved religion, as Protestants did.

In this circumstance, church authorities decided to hold a very definite position: according to the bishops, it was impossible for the children of the Catholic community to preserve and maintain their faith strong while attending public schools. However, those same Bishops didn't support any struggle against *common schools* that was aimed at creating a system of separate schools. In fact, initially, Catholic prelates sought from United States institutions a guaranty that public schools were nondenominational, according to their interpretation. Only later – when it became clear that this objective couldn't be reached – did the United States clergy direct its action toward the creation of a “separate system of education for the children of their communion” (Lannie, 6).

It is however necessary to highlight that parish schools have never been widespread nor have they been managed in the same way by all their directors. Bishops could decide where and how to build schools, according to the interest and the importance of each parish. Moreover, the degree of affection shown by various immigrants' communities toward their church played a key role in establishing whether a certain community should receive the diocesan investments to build schools or not.

5. Conclusions

The United States Catholic Church developed in an environment imbued with Protestant culture and values. Furthermore, the necessity of having a sturdy institutional structure convinced its first bishop to choose the *Trustees corporation* system, a popular model in the Protestant world, in which community properties were assigned to legal subjects. As a result, also the relationship between lay people and Catholic priests began to resemble those between laymen and priests of the other Christian denominations. Such an Americanised Church became, already in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the reference point for millions of Catholic immigrants, toward whom it had a dual role, of inclusion and distinction. It was mostly through parish schools that immigrants started to be instructed on US society, costumes, and language. These institutions basically intended to Americanise European Catholics, while preserving their faith, and trying to prevent this

⁶ Regarding this, it should be noted that studies on the role of Catholic parishes in the United States have sparked a debate between two basic positions: for some scholars, parishes delayed the integration of immigrants by offering alternative roles of socialization, unrelated to US society; other scholars, instead, argue that parishes actually ferried immigrants to society and local culture, favoring integration (the debate is briefly reported in Sanfilippo, 2007, 998).



Americanisation process from reaching its extreme consequence: religious conversion.

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