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Evangelizing a Nation: Catholic Priests in America

Abstract

According to the most recent statistics provided by the American bishops, there are an astonishing seventy million Catholics who call the United States home. Five hundred years ago, there was not a single Roman Catholic to be found anywhere in this vast expanse of forests, prairies, and mountains. (Moreover, presumably no one living at that time in what is now the United States had any knowledge of Jesus Christ, for the episcopacy of Erik Gnutsson in twelfth century Greenland hardly resulted in any evangelization of the Christian faith in the western hemisphere.) As the European authorities competed to establish colonies and settlements in the New World, each journeyed across the Atlantic with three primary intentions: to amass wealth, to establish glorious and prestigious settlements, and to spread the Christian faith. In the centuries that followed, several religious orders—perhaps the most well-known of which were the Jesuits and the Franciscans—washed up on the shores of America, forever shaping the progress and expansion of Roman Catholicism in America.

Keywords

America, United States, Catholic, Priests, Franciscans, Jesuits

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According to the most recent statistics provided by the American bishops, there are an astonishing seventy million Catholics who call the United States home. Five hundred years ago, there was not a single Roman Catholic to be found anywhere in this vast expanse of forests, prairies, and mountains. (Moreover, presumably no one living at that time in what is now the United States had any knowledge of Jesus Christ, for the episcopacy of Erik Gnuvsson in twelfth century Greenland hardly resulted in any evangelization of the Christian faith in the western hemisphere.) As the European authorities competed to establish colonies and settlements in the New World, each journeyed across the Atlantic with three primary intentions: to amass wealth, to establish glorious and prestigious settlements, and to spread the Christian faith. In the centuries that followed, several religious orders—perhaps the most well-known of which were the Jesuits and the Franciscans—washed up on the shores of America, forever shaping the progress and expansion of Roman Catholicism in America.

Father Raymond Schroth's simple summation of the Jesuits' arrival in North America perhaps best captures the plight of the Society of Jesus throughout the world during the sixteenth century: "[Their] first adventure...neither began nor ended well." In September 1566, a large Spanish ship, ravaged twice by hurricanes, floated off the north coast of present-day Florida with a contingent of Spanish soldiers and three Jesuit missionaries aboard. Separated from the other ships of the fleet and horribly lost, the ship's captain finally located the port of Saint Helena. There, the Jesuit priests disembarked and were taken in by Don Pedro Menendez, a Spanish Governor who had been tasked with destroying a French Huguenot territory.¹ In an attempt to pacify the resistance of the natives, the Spanish implored the Society of Jesus to

send young priests who could convert the Indians. As part of a fledgling albeit dynamic missionary group, the young Jesuits who arrived at St. Augustine were part of a larger organization of Catholic priests who were evangelizing around the world. There, at early colonial settlements, priests of the Society of Jesus would begin to sow the seeds of Catholicism in the New World.

In 1634, approximately 150 British men, women, and children waded ashore St. Clement's Island at the mouth of the Potomac River. There, Father Andrew White offered the first Mass, as he said, "in [that] part of the world."² With assistance from the brother of the second Lord Baltimore, a large cross was hewn from a tree and erected on the site. From then on, Jesuits began to baptize Indians in the area and celebrate Masses for the few faithful English Catholics who settled in the Maryland colony. In subsequent years, young English Jesuits wrote to their provincial expressing their desire to volunteer for service in the New World. One young priest, Christopher Morris, offered three reasons for his willingness to travel, three reasons commonly cited by Jesuits with similar passions: "to save the souls of the Indians, for whom Christ has suffered as for Europeans...to use [his] skills in language and music for the 'primitive church'...[and] to die a martyr like his brother Jesuits in China and Japan."³ Dissatisfied with complacency, the Jesuits in the British colonies restlessly sought new endeavors, be it baptizing Indians or converting their fellow citizens who practiced Protestantism.

In the seventeenth century, prolific fur trading, fishing markets, and a desire to spread Roman Catholicism brought the French first to Quebec before continuing towards the Great Lakes and eventually moving south down the Mississippi

¹ Schroth, Raymond A. *The American Jesuits*. New York University Press: New York, 2007, pp. 3-4. 1

² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-25.

River to present day New Orleans.⁴ In a concerted effort to develop a missionary church, French Jesuits established missions in the Northeast (present day Maine); as the French acquired greater expanses of territory, the Jesuits consequently moved west to establish parishes.⁵ Led primarily by the Jesuits, French Catholics engaged in evangelization techniques different from that of their Spanish brothers in the Society of Jesus. After attempting to adapt to the nomadic lifestyle of the Indians, the Jesuits from France endeavored to alter the Indians' attitudes regarding permanent settlements and other cultural practices. While many Jesuits—particularly those from France—permitted the Indians to maintain various aspects of their ancestral culture, a significant point of contention emanated over marriage: “Of all the Christian laws which [the Jesuits] propound to [the Indians], there is not one that seems as hard to them as that which forbids polygamy.”⁶ Though years of disagreement persisted, the French Jesuit efforts to establish Indian missions were a major achievement, “measured by the missionaries’ standards of Christian witness or by the criterion of human courage and dedication.”⁷

Amid the stirring and difficult times of the Crusades, the Order of Friars Minor was organized by Francis of Assisi in 1209, nearly two centuries before Columbus’ voyage across the Atlantic. Clothed with a simple habit and the sandals of Italian peasants, poverty became the mantra of the “Franciscans;” possession of private and corporate property was forbidden.⁸ Retaining features of monasticism while often serving as priests, the new mendicant order began to serve throughout Europe. As news of the discovery of the New World was heralded to the friars assembled at Florence in 1493, friars began to petition their vicar-general for permission to evangelize the “newly discovered islands.”⁹ In a unique way, the Franciscans

occupied a special role in the discovery of America: “Franciscanism was intimately involved in the discovery, settlement, and social evolution of the Americas...in 1484, Columbus and his son sought hospitality and counsel at the Franciscan friary in La Rabida.”¹⁰ At a time when Christopher Columbus was ridiculed and derided for such a risible notion as sailing west into waters unknown, the Franciscans beseeched the Spanish monarchy on his behalf. Though no records demonstrate that a Franciscan priest sailed on the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, or the *Santa Maria* in 1492, the role of the Order in obtaining funding and support for Columbus’ voyage is quite remarkable regarding the colonization of the New World.

A few short decades following Columbus’ primary conquest of the Indies, Pope Clement VII in 1532 granted Charles V permission to send one hundred and twenty Franciscans to the New World; not all were to be sent at once, but rather were dispatched across the Atlantic semi-annually to the Spanish settlements throughout the Caribbean, Mexico, and the (present day) Southern United States. Of all the settlements ministered by the Order of Friars Minor, perhaps none were as successful or as fruitful as those in Florida, as Father Maynard explicates: “Everything in Florida fitted (sic) into the economic framework of the colony. Yet, the missionary field as cultivated in Florida has its pages of heroism and self-sacrifice; indeed, the more so because of the necessity imposed on the friars by their isolation from cultural centers and meager pittance they received for their labors.”¹¹ Characterized by their Hispanic upbringings, the Franciscans serving the settlements in Florida (and certainly those in the Caribbean, the Antilles, and Mexico as well) sought to minister to the Catholics already living there and save the souls of the heathen Indians through baptism, separation from native culture, and incorporation of Catholic customs and

⁴ Carey, Patrick W. *Catholics in America: A History*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: Maryland, 2004, p. 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸ Geiger, Maynard. *The Franciscan Conquest of Florida, 1573-1618*. Time & News Publishing Co.: Gettysburg, 1936, pp. 14-15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

morals.¹² Indeed, this remained the basis of both Franciscan and Jesuit evangelization throughout America for several centuries to come.

Following the age of colonial exploration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Catholic Church continued to spread across the wilderness of North America, albeit at a comparatively sluggish pace. It was not until after the American Revolution that the religious orders ministering all over America and the territories to the west experienced another period of growth and prosperity. For the Franciscans, this renaissance came at the end of the eighteenth century in the form of dynamic missionaries in California. As for the Jesuits, their resurgence came about by way of thoughtfully constructed plans during the early and mid-nineteenth century that spoke to the heart of the American individual.

Perhaps the most renowned of all missionaries—Franciscan or otherwise—to serve the natives was Junipero Serra. A Franciscan novice by the age of thirteen, Serra earned his doctorate in theology by age twenty-six and began evangelizing in Mexico by age thirty-three. A skilled priest and administrator, Serra was appointed superior of the Franciscan missionary effort in Lower California in 1767. In the years that followed, he established nine Indian missions south of San Francisco, all of which became prosperous institutions of agriculture and religion. Because of his tireless missionary efforts, though controversial because of the haste nature in which they were performed, Serra baptized in only a few short years approximately six-thousand natives and confirmed an additional five-thousand three-hundred.¹³ By the end of the eighteenth century, much of the mission work among the native peoples had been accomplished. Once Mexico gained independence in the early nineteenth century, Spanish missionary friars were expelled from the territories of New Mexico, Texas, Arizona, and California. Although many of the

Californian missions became secularized, a small remnant of friars was able to continue their work at Mission Santa Barbara.

Concurrently, a new age in Franciscan history began in the United States as friars from Europe began to minister to the massive influx of Catholic immigrants from Europe.¹⁴

Amidst the flood of (primarily European) immigrants between the mid-nineteenth century and the end of the First World War, the Franciscans in the United States began to organize several territorial foundations, many of which were later designated as provinces. Established to efficaciously minister to the various ethnicities who settled to America, the territories and provinces consisted of Franciscans who principally adhered to a strict observance of friar life as originally prescribed by St. Francis. Shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War, Austrian friars from the Reformed province in Tyrol arrived in Cincinnati to begin ministering to the needs of German immigrants in the region. Simultaneously, Italian friars began working with the Italian immigrants who arrived in New York City; as the population of Catholics in Western New York increased, Italian friars of the Franciscan province in New York were tasked with serving the faithful in the newly organized Diocese of Buffalo. Throughout the United States, in St. Louis, Albuquerque, Oakland, and Franklin (Wisconsin), new generations of Franciscans established territories and began to serve the increased number of Polish, German, Italian, and Slovak Catholics who had journeyed to America seeking a better life.¹⁵

As the Franciscans were hard at work organizing friars to serve the needs of various immigrant groups, the Jesuits in the United States were eagerly reestablishing themselves during the Age of Jackson, “an era of growth and confidence in which America, having defeated Great Britain more decisively at New Orleans in the War of 1812, was born again—this time in

¹² Carey, p. 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁴ The Franciscans in the US [web article]. *US Franciscans*. Retrieved from <https://usfranciscans.org>, para. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 3-12.

the image of a democrat and a frontiersman.”¹⁶ Amidst a new age of industry, urbanization, immigration, and religious revival, the Jesuits were gradually welcomed back into many of the nations from which they had been previously expelled. Following several tenures of poor general leadership, a strong Dutchman, Joannes Roothaan refocused the essence of Jesuit life around the *Spiritual Exercises* and an emphasis on education: common vernacular, philosophy, math, history, and science. In concert with the rough and tough frontier spirit so fondly embraced by Americans, the renewed vision of the Society of Jesus worked swiftly. Under new leadership, the Jesuits (particularly in the United States) sought practical ways to instill the Roman Catholic faith. Most often, the first step in their plan was to either establish a school or take control of a school which had already been started by another Catholic religious order. Secondly, the Jesuits strove to earn for their schools positive reputations as institutions of higher learning, discipline, and *cura personalis*. In contrast to the ethno-centric establishments of the Franciscans, the Jesuits often organized their schools not by language or culture; frustratingly, this practice frequently resulted in language barriers.¹⁷ Regardless of such minor inconveniences, the Jesuits’ emphasis on education for the sake of developing more compassionate and thoughtful individuals was the first stage in their pursuit of social justice. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Jesuit educational institutions across America (including Boston College, Marquette, Gonzaga, Canisius, John Carroll, Fairfield, Holy Cross, and Seattle) opened their doors to all peoples—regardless of ethnicity or financial status.¹⁸

Intimately involved with the propagation of the Roman Catholic faith in America since the age of European exploration in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, both the Order of Friars Minor and the Society of Jesus have demonstrated quite extensively their usefulness

and success in evangelization. From their respective voluntary desires to sow the seeds of Catholicism throughout the wilderness of the New World at an early time of great uncertainty, to their unceasing service to Indian converts and the plethora of European immigrants throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Franciscans and Jesuits have both unequivocally heeded Jesus’ call in chapter twenty-eight of the Gospel of Matthew: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Though such diligent work was not without heartache, frustration, or suffering, their respective persistence yielded a great harvest of millions upon millions of Catholics. As Americans march toward the future, amid a society plagued with many of the same problems the early Franciscans and Jesuits experienced—nativism, racism, and war—perhaps the two orders will be able to, as St. Paul writes in the Letter to the Ephesians, “build up the body of Christ.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Schroth, p. 58.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 59-61.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 62-63.

¹⁹ McLellan, Daniel. “To Evangelize American Culture: A Franciscan Approach.” *Franciscan Studies*, vol. 47. Franciscan Institute Publications, 1987, pp. 15-16.

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