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The Catholic Church and Immigrants
The Catholic Church in the United States 1789 - 1989
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This paper was presented by the Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland, D.D., Bishop of Birmingham, at a symposium in Columbus, Georgia, October 6, 1989, marking the Bicentennial of the Formal Establishment of the Catholic Church in the United States.

The year 1989 marked the 200th Anniversary of the appointment of Archbishop John Carroll as the first American bishop. When Archbishop Carroll was appointed in 1789 as the Bishop of Baltimore, his diocese included all of what was then the United States.

I am an immigrant. My coming to this country thirty-two years ago was intimately connected with generations of immigrants before me insofar as I received my theological education in All Hallows College in Dublin, a seminary specifically established almost 150 years ago to send priests to those countries to which the Irish were emigrating in the thousands.

Describing the Catholic Church in the United States as an "immigrant church" has almost become an unchallenged cliché. The concept has been used to explain both the strengths and weaknesses of the Church. My purpose this morning is to provide you with an overview of the various waves of Catholic immigrants who made the United States their home since John Carroll became the founder of the American hierarchy two hundred years ago this year. Limiting my remarks to immigration during the 19th and 20th centuries means, of course, that I have to pass over the often heroic endeavors of the Spanish Missionaries who left their mark on Florida, Texas, New Mexico, and California in the previous centuries. In like manner, I can only briefly acknowledge the zeal of the French Missionaries who brought the faith to areas as far apart as the Great Lakes and Louisiana and whose explorations focused European eyes on the vast expanse today known as the Midwest. Spain and France, in the age of colonization, were the two great Catholic powers and although it is often difficult to separate military aggressiveness from missionary activity one has only to meditate on the names of some of our foremost cities to know that their influence was a lasting one -- St. Augustine, San Antonio, San Francisco, and Los Angeles to be counterbalanced by New Orleans, Mobile, St. Louis and Detroit.

I am also going to pass over, largely because Archbishop Marino is going to deal with the topic of minorities, the role of Blacks and Hispanics in the Church, including the large Mexican component, and the most recent arrivals who continue to seek our shores.

It was not, however, from these richly Catholic settlements that John Carroll was to come. In God's providence he was to emerge from the milieu of the Protestant and manifestly anti-Catholic British and predominantly English-speaking colonies of the East Coast. Carroll, born in Upper Marlboro, Maryland in 1735, was only 13 years of age when his parents, bowing to

the demands of the penal legislation of the times and anxious to provide him with a Catholic education, sent him to a Jesuit school in French Flanders. In due time, he himself became a Jesuit but almost a year after the Papal dissolution of the Society of Jesus in 1773, he returned home to a land preparing for a revolution. He was 41 years when the Declaration of Independence was signed and among its signatories was his cousin, Charles Carroll, an eminently successful businessman who had shared his childhood crossing of the Atlantic.

Four centuries ago very few people of European descent resided in what we now know as the United States. When John Carroll was born the estimated population of the American colonies was 750,000 people. When he was consecrated Bishop in 1790, the Republic was 14 years old and the population of the original 13 states was just under four million. How many of these were Catholic? The most reliable answer comes from John Carroll himself in his requested report prepared for the Holy See in 1785. The largest concentration of Catholics was in Maryland, which he numbered 15,800. There were 7,000 in Pennsylvania and at least 1,500 in New York. He frankly admits that there must be many more Catholics in the that vast area east of the Mississippi which, he reported, was "destitute of priests." In the second section of his report, he praised the quality of religious practice of those born in the colonies but he was quite critical of the immigrants.

"For while there are few of our native Catholics who do not approach the Sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist, at least once a year, especially in Easter time, you can scarcely find any among the newcomers who discharge this duty of religion and there is reason to fear that the example will be very pernicious especially in commercial towns." This was a judgment which John Carroll maintained throughout his episcopate. Some see within it a certain elitism but it may not have been anything more than the apprehension of seeing his young Church being overwhelmed by thousands of poorly-educated immigrants for whom he had very few priests. His report of 1785 indicated that there were 19 priests in Maryland and five in Pennsylvania, five of whom were over or almost 70 years of age. To say the least, John Carroll's task was a formidable one. Whatever his reservations about the growing tide of immigrants from the traditionally Catholic countries of Europe, he worked with great skill and insight to further the position and influence of the Catholic community and to ensure, that unlike its suspect stature in the Colonial period, it would unlike its suspect stature in the Colonial period, it would henceforth be truly accepted as part of the mainstream of American life. Organizationally, four new Dioceses were established in 1808 and when John Carroll died seven years later, an ecclesiastical infrastructure had been established which would, in time, bear witness to his wisdom as a pastoral administrator with a prophetic sense of vision. I can only recommend that you use the occasion of his Episcopal anniversary to study his life and times so intimately wrapped up not only with our Church, but also with the birth of a nation.

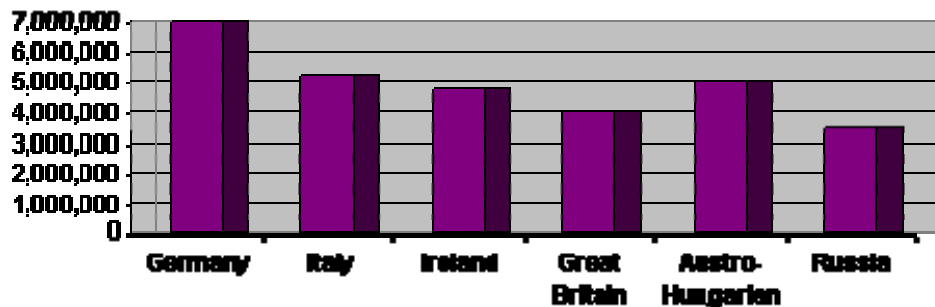
Beginning in 1820, we have somewhat reliable records of immigration because from that year on, the masters of vessels arriving in the United States were required by law to provide lists of their passengers upon arrival in the New World. The listing included the age, sex, occupation and national origin of each passenger. This system was never totally accurate but the sheer volume of new arrivals lessened the margin of error. Some arrived in this country without being counted, the counterpart of our modern undocumented residents. Some crossed the border from Canada and were never counted. Others returned to their native lands and in some cases immigrated a second time, thus achieving the dubious honor of being counted twice.

It is estimated that 40 million immigrants entered the United States between 1820 and 1976 but, of course, their arrival was not evenly spaced or nationally subdivided. They came in

waves depending on the political and or economic and or religious circumstances which forced them to seek a new beginning in a land which was not their own. One can distinguish two major tidal waves from Europe, one between 1820 and the end of the century which was predominantly from northern and western Europe, and the second which began before the first ebbed and continued until about 1920, this latter group being almost exclusively from southern and eastern Europe. After 1920, immigration to this country was slowed considerably by legislation and it has been controlled by such, not always successfully, ever since.

Keeping in mind that European borders and identities have changed frequently and sometimes radically during the past two centuries, if one were to list the country of origin of all immigrants during the 1800s and the early years of this century, the scorecard would read as follows:

US Emigration – 1820-1970



This listing is of special interest to Church-related studies because about one-third of the German immigrants were Catholic as were the vast majority of the Irish and Italians. Very few of the British immigrants were Catholic, but a large number from mid and Eastern Europe, especially the Poles, were Catholic. It is almost impossible to get an accurate count of how many Poles entered this country as immigrants even though we are conscious of their major contribution to Catholic life in this land. This predominantly Catholic nation has always been the victim of political dismembering, partition and even legal non-existence to such an extent that Poles entering the United States were frequently counted as Germans, Austrians or Russians. The sequence and the volume in which the Catholic immigrants arrived had a profound influence on the making of the Church in the United States, as we know it today.

The visual presentation in the upper right can be of assistance to us in trying to understand the large number of immigrants who arrived in this country during the century between 1820 and 1920. From the historical perspective, however, although the numbers are important, it is far more important to notice the order in which they arrived. Basically, they came in the order of Irish, German, Polish and Italian. The German numbers are about one-third of the total German movement into the United States, an estimate of the Catholic component. I do not represent the Polish numbers here because it is so difficult to obtain accurate statistics, but their contribution, in the latter half of the 19th century, was a major one. Other lands also experienced population losses to the New World, but in comparison to the "Big Four" the numbers were relatively small. Portugal, Spain and Lithuania should be mentioned and, of course, a considerable number of Eastern Rite Catholics made their homes in the U.S. It may be of interest that one major Catholic country, France, although it provided many bishops and clergy to the Infant Church in the New Republic, had no major movement of its people to the United

States during the years under consideration.

| | Catholic Emigration to US | Catholic Emigration to US | Catholic Emigration to US |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| | Irish | German | Italian |
| 1820 – 1850 | 1,042,000 | 171,000 | 4,000 |
| 1851 – 1880 | 1,787,000 | 816,000 | 77,000 |
| 1881 - 1900 | 1,043,000 | 674,000 | 959,000 |
| 1901 - 1930 | 706,000 | 296,000 | 3,611,000 |

A more exhaustive study of the growth of the Church since the time of John Carroll should also take into account that the rural population, 95% in 1790, decreased to 26% in 1970. Add to this the further pastoral complication of a population, which was always on the move, generally westward. In 1790, 97% of the continent's population lived in the east. By 1970, the location of the U.S. population was cited as East Coast 39%, East Central 26%, West Central 18%, and West Coast 17%.

The Irish

The first to arrive in large numbers were the Irish. Although they were poor and in many ways uneducated, they had a number of advantages which enabled them to seize the high ground from the perspective of their faith. Most of them spoke English and, although their brogue and their Catholicism were frequently subjects of ridicule and prejudice, knowledge of the language meant that the hierarchy of the family was never compromised by having the parents become dependent on the children as they struggled with a language not their own. This fact would profoundly affect later waves of non-English speaking immigrants.

The Irish, too, had developed a certain faith-centered unity because of the penal legal persecution. They suffered persecution until 1829, when Daniel O'Connell achieved Catholic emancipation. Another advantage the Irish enjoyed was the determination of the home country to educate and send hundreds of priests to those lands to which the Irish had emigrated – particularly after the catastrophic famine years of the 1840s. Their priests were not only religious leaders, but they also

- promoted education;
- fostered family solidarity; and,
- urged their congregations to be politically active, in order to wrest their share of rights from a reluctant establishment.

The Irish, too, stayed in the urban areas although it would be naive to think that the only reason they did not penetrate the vast rural areas of the new nation was their disillusionment with the land and failed potato crops. As the century progressed, many of the Irish-born priests and first-generation Irish priests dominated the ranks of the hierarchy much to the dissatisfaction of the other later-arriving national groups, especially the Germans. On the secular side, one could discern the formation of the Irish political machines, which gradually took over the growing cities of the northeast.

Over 250,000 Irish emigrated to the United States before the full impact of the famine made itself felt. In the 20 years after the famine, almost two million survived the Atlantic crossing to

settle in America. During the same period, death and emigration elsewhere counted for another two million. If one studies immigration from the point of view of the countries of origin, then Ireland suffered most of all because it effectively lost half of its people and American wakes, the cultural rites of departure as one went into exile, became so prevalent as to become accepted as an economic necessity. It was only after 1930, with the coming of the Irish independence that the tide was stemmed somewhat. Although a number of Protestants from Northern Ireland, often called the Scots-Irish, also emigrated to the New World, their numbers are relatively few in relation to the vast Catholic exodus and a number of them settled in Canada.

In general, all the immigrant groups had similar experiences and each, in turn, was the victim of prejudice. If one studies speech patterns over the past two centuries – especially in the area of ethnic humor – the same disparaging jokes were told about each group in turn. Early in the last century the standard answer to the question, “Why was the wheelbarrow invented?” was, “So the Irish could learn to stand up straight.” You will find that the same joke persisted down the years with those of the latest immigrant group being the victims of the sarcasm. Despite the words of welcome now etched on the Statue of Liberty, “*Give me your tired, your poor,*” this sentiment did not prevail too often when the newly arrived began to flex their collective muscle. In 1844, one Joseph Buckingham, a Boston politician, frustrated by seeing his political base diluted by the growing number of immigrants, gave vent to his anger by declaring “*Irishmen fresh from the bogs of Ireland are led up to vote like dumb brutes. . .to vote down intelligent honest Americans.*” Many immigrations later, similar attitudes can still be found in this country with the most recent newcomers falling heir to the criticism.

The Germans

As the last century progressed, there was a noticeable increase of immigrants who identified themselves as German. This became a flood tide between 1850 and 1860, when almost a million arrived in the United States. In the next 30 years, another three million sought refuge and a new life in a country that reached an overall population of 76 million at the turn of the century. We face a major difficulty at this point because although those who identified themselves as German constituted the largest single ethnic group to reach our shores, not all of them were Catholic. Obviously, a large number were Lutheran and a sizeable minority was Jewish. Most commentators seem to agree that approximately one-third of the one-way travelers were Catholic and this, of course, probably included some from present day Poland. Unlike the Irish, many of the Germans were not shy about settling in the rural areas. Perhaps to some extent because of the Irish, they often moved west in large numbers leaving their mark in the new states of the upper Midwest. Those Germans who remained in the cities banded together to establish ethnic parishes, the vast majority of which had schools. In this way they protected their customs, their culture and their language. The ethnic parish thus became the solution to the problem of integrating large numbers of immigrants into a diocese where absorption was difficult because of language differences. This policy was encouraged by some bishops, tolerated by others and frowned upon by many. It must be remembered, however, that the Mass, offered in Latin, was the one unifying force shared by the ethnic parishes, which made it possible for the local bishops to visit all of the parishes in a meaningful way.

This poses a question for us today. Is the ethnic parish the best way for us to absorb the new groups of immigrants arriving in our country every year? In passing, let me say that we are all aware of what happens when these urban parishes are closed because the ethnic parishioners desert it to move to the suburbs. The recent Detroit experience is still making headlines.

The Poles

Polish Catholics started to arrive in the U.S. after 1850 and the initial trickle of immigrants soon grew into a flood. Most of the Polish Catholics crowded into the urban centers of the northeast cities with a decided preference for Chicago. By 1920, they're well over one million Polish-American Catholics in Chicago, Pittsburgh, New York, Milwaukee, Buffalo and Detroit. Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Cleveland also housed a considerable number of Catholics of Polish origin and this concentration in the major cities made it somewhat easier for them to establish extremely large ethnic parishes which enabled their language, culture and traditions to nourish themselves constantly. Clergy from Poland and large religious communities, some established in this country, strove to maintain the vital link between one's nationality and one's faith. Current events in Poland are illustrative of this fact. In some dioceses, the large Polish parishes almost constituted a church within a church. Divisions of this kind often flared into public dissension when Polish pastors frequently felt that they were being treated as second-class Catholics and there was often intense rivalry between the Polish parishes themselves. Some of the conflict was bandied about in the secular press and it became a source of concern for a hierarchy which had little or no Polish representation but it, unfortunately, also became a source of much satisfaction for the enemies of the church. Although it is a long and complicated story, the persistent dissension and angry rhetoric eventually resulted in schism, the establishment of the Polish National Catholic Church, which declared itself independent of Rome. Although this breakaway church never attracted more than a small percentage of Polish-American Catholics, the movement in itself provides the serious scholar and pastoral planner with a wealth of material relative to the challenge of integrating ethnic groups into an established ecclesiastical structure. In the early decade of this century, Polish Catholics continually fought for a greater acceptance within the church in this country. In 1920, the Polish clergy addressed a long memorial to Rome, which was not shy in outlining their grievances as it sought ways to protect both their fidelity to Rome and their links to Poland. In reading this history one is inclined to feel that the election of a Polish Pontiff in the person of pope John Paul II was for Polish Catholics, an event of a deep significance equal to the implications of the election of John F. Kennedy as the first Catholic president of the U.S.

The Italians

As we have already indicated, the Italians arrived in the 40-year period between 1880 and 1920. Well over three million settled in the U.S. in the first two decades of this century. Again, in looking at these figures, we must be conscious that Italy, as we know it today, is a relatively young political entity. Many of the new arrivals were not born in the reunified Italy and in the early years the majority came from poorer regions of southern Italy and Sicily. They had little formal education and, like many of the immigrants before them, to survive they had to accept the jobs nobody else wanted. In many areas, their presence was deeply resented. Please remember that we are talking about the days before unions, a concept which was gaining the support of the church at this time in its articulation of the implications of social justice. The church was ill prepared for this exodus from Italy. The "Italian Problem," as it was called, became the topic of the time in Episcopal circles and ecclesiastical journals. The newcomers' indifference to religious practice was often used as a pretext to do very little for the latest arrivals but this attitude changed considerably when it was discovered that Protestant groups were organizing to proselytize them. The numbers were so vast that in some cities the problem seemed beyond a solution, but once again it was the arrival of a native clergy, specially trained for the task, which set the tone for the pastoral care of the Italian immigrants. The Scalabrini Fathers, named after the bishop who founded them, deserve mention in this regard. A few American bishops also developed a new initiative . . . they sent some of their Irish American seminarians for training in Italy. Gradually dozens of Italian parishes provided a partial

solution to the pastoral challenge and a number of religious communities took up the task, the most notable being the group headed by Mother Cabrini. The first World War reduced the number of Italian immigrants and as the economic lot of the Italians improved so did their integration into both the local church and American society.

The arrival of so many different immigrant groups often resulted in our largest cities playing host to a great variety of ethnic parishes. Let me give you just one example. In 1915, the Archdiocese of Chicago had 200 parishes. Of these, 33 were listed as Polish, 30 German, ten Italian, ten Lithuanian, five Slovak, four French, four Croatian, two Slovene with one each designated as Dutch, Black, Syrian, Belgian, Chaldean and Hungarian.

We have now commented upon four major immigrant groups which, in due time, along with others, constituted the Catholic Church in the U.S. In her excellent book, *“Immigrants and Their Church,”* Dolores Liptak summarizes the ethnic mix of the church today as follows:

. . . Millions of turn-of-the-century immigrants still form the core of present Catholic membership. They account for the Church’s ethnic base as 20 percent Italian, 16 percent Irish, 16 percent German, 16 percent Hispanic and 12 percent Slavic with the remaining 20 percent representing current influxes of European, African and Asian minorities.

Observations and Conclusions

History, like our daily newspaper, often pays scant attention to success stories and within the long and continuing immigration experience of our church there are some magnificent chapter of sacrifice and faith, which have resulted in a church of approximately 53 million people in the U.S. today. The dissensions, the set-backs, the prejudices are also well documented. The hatred of the Catholic foreigner fomented by the *“know-nothing”* political movements and their ilk, including the *“Ku Klux Klan”* are sad episodes in the maturing of our nation. So, too, unfortunately, is the unhappy and, I might say, certainly unchristian attitude with which the Catholic immigrants of one generation greeted the Catholic immigrants of the next generation especially when their language and their customs were different.

Are we that much more understanding or open today?

What have learned to assist us in accommodating the large number of Hispanic immigrants currently arriving in our midst or to assist other minorities to find a just a secure and totally accepted role within the Church?

Are we making the effort to differentiate between integration and assimilation . . . allowing each ethnic group to be a part of the whole without having to lose its ethnic distinctiveness and all that such implies?

Are we able to resist the temptation to believe that everything would be fine if all others were just like us?

Certainly, it is always more demanding and even exasperating to work with diversity. But a total uniformity can be sterile and the church at Pentecost began by coping with rich diversity. If one reads the letters of John Carroll, it is obvious that he intended the Catholic Church in the new nation to be accepted as thoroughly American and in no way foreign to the aspirations of the new democracy. To some extent this ideal was frustrated by the waves of immigrants, which began arriving even before his death. His successors struggled with this concept and it

even divided the hierarchy rather bitterly on more than once occasion. The concept of separation of church and state was alien to both European experience and the principles of Catholic theology . . .today, we might say sociology . . .at the time. Nevertheless, through all its immigrant experiences and in some ways because of them, the pluralism developed in the American environment established a link between the dream of John Carroll and the unprecedented declaration of the Second Vatican Council on Religious Liberty, in many ways the brainchild of the late Father John Courtney Murray.

In conclusion, one cannot study the role of the Catholic immigrants in the formation of the Catholic Church in the U.S. without thinking of those who, in the process, lost the faith. The faith survived best and, indeed, prospered in those areas where priests were found to provide leadership for the immigrant communities. The clergy provided far more than sacramental services. They organized the immigrants to band together for solidarity, to seek education, to support each other and to get involved in the political process. Generally speaking, where there were priests there are today a high percentage of Catholics. By way of illustration, some of the first priests ordained in Ireland in the 1840s to minister to the exiles of the famine worked in Providence, Rhode Island, an area which is today 57 percent Catholic. On the other hand, those immigrant Catholics who settled in widely scattered rural areas or those inland towns or settlements which the meager supply of clergy could not reach, often fell away from the faith and frequently they and their children joined other Christian denominations. This is the shortcoming to be expected in a church which, by its nature, is heavily dependent on hierarchical structure with the Eucharist, and hence the priest, being central to its organization. There is a lesson to be learned here. Without in any way denying the central role of the Eucharist in the Catholic life, we need to empower our laity, no longer the uneducated immigrant masses, to provide and enhance Catholic presence in those areas where clergy are not always available. Perhaps the Holy Father's pastoral "*Christifideles Laici*" can be viewed as a major step in that direction.

In a 1980 document called "*Cultural Pluralism in the United States*," the bishops wrote, "We urge all Americans to accept the fact of religious and cultural pluralism not as an historical oddity or a sentimental journey into the past, but a vital, fruitful and challenging phenomenon of our society." Our Black and Hispanic bishops have since published documents, which reiterate the same theme.

The U.S. and the Catholic Church in the U.S. is uniquely the product of immigration. No other country and no other church attracted newcomers in such numbers from so many ethnic backgrounds. Unless one is a Native American or Black -- both incorporated into American society against their will -- the chances are that we are immigrants or the posterity of immigrants. Inter-marriage and the passing of generations may dull the awareness of one's ethnic ancestry but all of humankind is haunted by the implications of its roots which began in Eden and will only end when we go home again. . . to God!