

CATHOLICS OF THE SOUTH: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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As the historical study of various aspects of American society has unfolded over the course of centuries, the terms “Catholic” and “South” have matured as specific identifications of peoples with clear and precise heritages. But far too often these identities have been victimized, made unclear, through certain scholarly purviews of authors writing the histories. One noticeable tendency long present in the publishing of American history textbooks, for example, has been the over-focusing on the English heritage of the American story at the expense of a more in-depth and accurate look at the Spanish historical legacy. Thus the Protestant Anglican narrative, even today, oftentimes tends to be biased and over-stated. Certainly this is true in Texas where your author lives. Just look, for example, at the manner in which the Alamo is handled. Or again, study how the U.S. invasion of Mexico in 1846 frequently is taught in our schools. Clearly, within this context, the American South and the Roman Catholic history of the United States, particularly in the South, needs to be presented more accurately. It is the several perspectives of this need to seek historical truth in these areas more accurately that this essay will search out.

Focus on Catholic and Southern

Any historical study of Roman Catholics of the American South would require researching into the narratives of people with a complex religious-demographic legacy. Fundamental to this is that there is, or was, a civilization or culture—using the late Jacques Maritain’s proviso that civilization and culture are the same¹—molded not only from within their Catholicism, but one as well mirroring influences embedded deeply in the society of whatever part of the nation they live, or lived. In the case of our topic, of course, such would be the American South. An added dimension for our consideration of those Catholics is that they usually brought with them original ethnic-religious heritages that included not only languages, literature, the arts (including music), and other cultural traditions, but also viewpoints and attitudes whose roots can be traced back to the countries or locales from which they, the immigrants or their ancestors came. These diverse lands might include various non-Southern regions of the United States or foreign lands

enjoying a clear historical Roman Catholic identity, such as Spain, Mexico or other nations of Latin America, France, Ireland, Germany, Poland, Italy or Czechoslovakia—to name just a few. This latter development matured as an aspect of a Catholic presence being planted and then spread throughout the expansive territory that eventually came to be known as the American South.

This essay will try to analyze some of the more significant aspects of what it meant to be both a Catholic and a Southerner. Such an attempt should raise some key questions in the mind of the researcher. Were these Catholic personages known more as Roman Catholics or as Southerners? Or, perhaps, were they well known as both, such as Father Abram Ryan, the poet priest of the Confederacy? How would the American South be defined? What did it mean to be a Southerner? Looked at in the context of the previously-mentioned Roman Catholic presence that had grown to maturity in certain areas or regions of that expansive land known as the American South, maturing within municipalities, villas, pueblos, ranches or farms, *Jacales*, or among families or individuals—who were some of the more well known Southerners, and what were the developments that came to be identified as related to their being Catholics as well as Southerners? Perhaps another way of expressing this query is how did these characteristics impact their being Catholics as well as Southerners? Certainly one outstanding Catholic Southerner would be Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, General of the Confederate Army who commanded the force that fired on Fort Sumter on 12 April 1861 to begin the American Civil War, and ranking Confederate general throughout that conflict as well as a prominent planter and engineer following the war, and a Roman Catholic of French parentage from New Orleans. His parents were devout Catholics and strongly French in their immigrant lineage. General Beauregard seemed to see himself as more Southern than French.

Any such investigation as the one we are here discussing would have to analyze the demographic nature of the Catholic Southerners. Were they Catholics who—as alluded to earlier—immigrated to the South from elsewhere and whose lives might have been influenced by their having been born and raised in non-Southern areas of the United States or in another country? Were they Southern-born Catholics? How convincingly were they Catholic and how deeply Southern? For example, Hispanic Catholics in a state like Texas resided in a “Southern” state but hardly would themselves carry the mantle of being “Southerners.” Even to this day the majority of them are devoted Catholics. Related to this, it is important to discover from what areas of

the American South were these Catholics? How different were—and are—Catholics from states with small Catholic populations and histories of active anti-Catholicism, such as the Carolinas and Georgia, and Catholics of southern states with quite visible Catholic populations that have evidenced a deep-seated omnipresence in the stories of those states, such as Florida, Louisiana, or Texas?

Appreciating that the definition of territorial boundaries of the frontiers of Southern culture is a perennial subject of discussion, studies on Catholics of the South might focus on what is often referred to as the Old South.² Central to that would be investigating Catholics and their lives throughout the territory that made up the eleven states of the Confederacy: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. But the question of the Catholic Southerner could be expanded to include slave states south of the Mason-Dixon Line that remained loyal to the Union in the American Civil War: Missouri, Kentucky, West Virginia (became a state in 1863), Maryland (founded by the English Catholics the Calverts), and Delaware.³ Within this latter more broad territorial expanse, differences between what was considered “Southern” would have to be defined.

Personages and Sources

For decades research and writing about Catholics of the South were mainly confined to Church history. While of considerable importance, this approach has proven to have its limitations. Such is true in part because it tended to downplay the significance of Catholics—especially laypersons—to, among other areas: economic, civic, social, political, and scholarly life in the South. Such also tended to play down the ethnic-cultural legacy of the growth of the Faith in the South, especially in the Old South.

Having already mentioned the importance of General Beauregard and Father Ryan, it must be realized that many people of the South were Catholics of significance. Therefore, it seems obvious that Catholic Southerners, as well as significant topics of historical interest, should be discussed in any scholarly study on Catholics of the South. Covering these two broad areas in any comprehensive manner would require thorough research among primary and secondary sources. As is usually the case in scholarly work, the researcher would begin by scouring the major secondary works on the subject to help lay a base for looking at primary sources. Among the outstanding studies already published on Catholics of the South, there are two which are of

paramount importance to anyone contemplating a study of this subject. *Catholics in the Old South* (already cited in the bibliography of this essay), edited by Randall M. Miller and Jon L. Wakelyn, a 1983 book that Mercer University Press published, includes various essays by excellent authors, offered under two broad headings: "Church and Society" and "Society and Church." Among the contributors to this tome, in addition to Miller and Wakelyn are Raymond H. Schmandt; Richard R. Duncan; Sister Frances Jerome Woods, C.D.P.; R. Emmett Curran, S.J.; Gary B. Mills; and Dennis Clark.⁴ Beyond this publication, James J. Thompson's *The Church, the South, and the Future* (Christian Classics, Inc., 1988), must also be read.⁵ His chapters contain compelling titles and get right to the points of the author's concerns. The topics are entitled "New South, Old Religion;" "The Pope's Folks in the Land of Cotton;" "Catholic-Baiting with a Southern Accent;" "It's a Long, Hard Road from Dixieland to Rome;" "If Your Heart's Not in Dixie;" and "A Catholic South." These two books address much of what we have been speaking about in this essay. And much like a comment by a historian years ago about how John Henry Cardinal Newman wrote in such a manner as to draw his readers more deeply into reading about the Faith,⁶ so also will these two tomes on Catholics of the South impel people to study further on this topic.

Attached as appendices to this paper are two lists identifying major personages (Appendix 1) as well as topics on the Catholic life of the American South (Appendix 2) which could be seen as guides to any study on Catholics of the South. To identify briefly a few of these, we might begin by bringing up the name of William H. Gaston, a famous judge and lawyer of New Berne, North Carolina. His mother, Margaret, too, should be discussed. Many know of the importance to the Church in South Carolina of first Bishop of Charleston John England, a prelate whom Professor John Glimary Shea called "the light of the American hierarchy."⁷ But Bishop England's sister, Joanna, too, would be an important figure to write about. Prominent among converts to the Catholic Faith, especially during the Civil War era, were Dr. John Harwood Burt and his wife, living near Columbia, South Carolina. The two of them together brought many into the Church. Another convert, General Abbot Brisbane of Charleston, South Carolina, commanded the Irish volunteers during the Seminole War. Later, as an engineer he oversaw the building of the Blue Ridge Railroad and served as a professor at the Citadel. Of note, he tried to establish a Catholic colony called St. Ignatius near Albany, Georgia. Perhaps, other than General Beauregard, no Catholic Southern military man of the American Civil War was better known than Raphael Semmes. Originally from Charles

County, Maryland, Semmes eventually moved to Mobile, Alabama, a noted Catholic settlement which the Jesuits had founded. During the American Civil War, up to January 1862, he commanded the C.S.S. five gun steam sloop *Sumpter*, a ship which played havoc with the U.S. merchant marine. Then he acted as commander of the C.S.S. warship *Alabama*, a vessel named after his adopted state.⁸

Several Catholics were part of the political scene in the South. Among them were John Kenna of Virginia/West Virginia, a Confederate soldier who following the war became a United States Senator; M.P. O'Connor, prominent state politician of Beaufort, South Carolina, who was elected to the United States Congress in 1879; Clement Hill from Louisville, Kentucky, who became a United States Congressman; Theodore O'Hara of Kentucky, and later of Mobile, Alabama, southern intellectual, poet, and politician; James P. Villere, New Orleans legislator and eventually governor; and Charles Gayarre, New Orleans state legislator and United States Congressman.

Another group were Catholics, lay, clerical, and religious, male and female, who served in various parts of what would be considered the American South but were born in foreign countries and were not real American Southerners. Foremost among them would be the Vincentian priest Jean-Marie Odin, C.M., born and raised in Hauteville, France, in the western region of the Archdiocese of Lyon. Arriving in the United States in 1822, Odin joined the Congregation of the Mission (the Vincentians) at their seminary in Perryville, Missouri. He then missioned from Missouri to Texas. Odin labored as Vicar Apostolic of Texas, 1842-1847, first Bishop of Galveston, 1847-1861, and second Archbishop of New Orleans, 1861-1870. Serving as the archbishop during the entire Civil War, he favored the Confederacy but lamented slavery and hardly would be considered a "Southerner." Another person who labored in the South was Mother Margaret Mary Healy Murphy, a lay woman from Ireland who, following the death of her husband, lived in San Antonio, Texas, worked among the poor children in that city—especially African Americans and Hispanics—and founded the female religious order that came to be known as the Sisters of the Holy Spirit. The work of that community soon expanded from Texas, through Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. She also erected the Catholic African American parish church of St. Peter Claver in San Antonio.

There were many lay people who were immigrants from other countries outside of the United States, visible in the American South. One of the better known within this grouping was John J. Linn, an immigrant from Ireland who passed through Louisiana in the late 1820s and settled in Texas, where he became a well known merchant and

politician. Linn was invited to the meeting at Washington on the Brazos where the Texas Declaration of Independence was signed on 2 March 1836, but he was unable to attend. A few years later he served as Mayor of Victoria. In 1888, Linn published a well-known autobiography entitled *Reminiscences of Fifty Years in Texas*, which even today is an excellent source for the study of Texas.⁹ These were only a few of the many such foreign-born Catholics who drifted into the America South and settled there.

Topics and Movements

Beyond researching the lives of individual Catholics and Catholic families in the American South, so too must be studied topics and developments of Catholic life in that land. In this category, again just to mention a few from the Appendix at the end of this paper on that topic, would be the following: How did the Catholic presence generally in the South metamorphose from century to century? How did it react to slavery? What was its relationship to racialism, for example the increasing threats of the nativists and the extremism of the Ku Klux Klan, especially the latter with its revival in the early twentieth century? In this sense, how did Catholics generally and the Church in particular evangelize and otherwise treat African American Catholics? What were the characteristics of Catholic education in the South: schools, colleges, and universities?

What was the Catholic presence among the diverse demographical regions and ethnicities of the South: Floridians, Carolinians, etc. to Cajuns and Creoles? What are the stories of the foundation and maturation of the various religious communities in the South? What about the establishment and growth of different groups of organizations focusing primarily—though not always exclusively—on the laity: the Knights of Columbus, Serra Clubs, different Third Orders, and such? What are the narratives of their influence on Church growth in the South of various ethnic groups: Hispanics, Irish, Polish, Germans, Czechs, Slovenes, Wends, Italians, French, English, and more? What was the story of Catholic influence in such areas as labor unions, miners' work, the literary world, the artistic environment, etcetera? Included in these areas of concern would be numerous famous Catholics: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, Kate Chopin, Katherine Anne Porter, Allen Tate, Dr. Carlos Eduardo Castaneda, Benedict Webb, and Dr. Roger Baudier, just to mention a handful.

Even in other areas of life, such as sports and entertainment, there have been—and still are—prominent Catholics. In professional baseball no name is more highly respected than that of Hank Aaron, a

Southerner whose family and he are Catholic converts. A famous baseball player from Louisiana who was a star for many years with the San Francisco Giants, Will Clark, is a strong Catholic. Research will uncover uncounted additional Catholics in the world of sports and entertainment.

Focus also must be given to the prominent churchwomen, beyond those already noted. Mentioning just three of the many dedicated female religious communities that served in the South, Mother Saint Francis Xavier, superior of the first female religious order to be assigned to Louisiana, led her Ursulines from Rouen, France, to New Orleans in 1727.¹⁰ More than a century later, the Ursulines sent the first sisters to Galveston, Texas, at the bidding of Bishop Odin, in January 1847. The Dominican Sisters served throughout the South. Notable, in Texas too were the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word.¹¹ There were, of course, a number of other female religious communities laboring in health work, education, charitable efforts and much more, from the Atlantic Coast to Texas, bringing the Catholic world to thousands of people.

Catholics too emerged prominent in the mercantile environment and at the same time contributed to the growth of the Church in their areas. To point out a couple of prominent Catholic mercantilists in Texas, in the latter nineteenth century the names Foley's (department stores) and Hagggar (men's clothing stores) stand out as giants. The founders of both of these large corporations were Irish Catholics who strongly supported the Church in their areas. And it is not surprising that one of the largest grant foundations in Texas carries the name of O'Connor. This same kind of story could be recited in several areas of the South.

Conclusion

In analyzing the topic of Catholics of the South, we must remember that Roman Catholic history has rarely received the attention it deserves in our educational system regarding the coverage of American history. This is especially true of the South. Textbook-after-textbook can be perused by scholars and found to be lacking in any kind of thorough coverage of Catholicism in the United States. Much of the reason for such a situation existing, at least until quite recently, is the tendency in America to teach American history from an English perspective. And even at the present time, oftentimes, studying the Catholic legacy of America falls more into a kind of politically correct compelling multi-cultural overview than a real historical appreciation of the Catholic narrative of the United States.

In great part, the scholarly weakness here remains embedded in Americans' attraction to viewing the history from the afore-mentioned English viewpoint, which itself carries a clear anti-Catholic bias. The Spanish and French initially brought Catholicism to that vast territory that would emerge as the American South. On 27 March 1513, Spaniard Juan Ponce de Leon disembarked on the eastern side of the peninsula that he named *Las Floridas*. Over the course of the next few years, Spanish explorers journeyed northward from Florida up the coast, where, in the year 1540, Hernando de Soto, accompanied by a dozen Catholic missionaries, explored the land of the Guale—modern day Georgia, named after King George II of England. Among the Catholic clerics with de Soto were diocesan priests, Dominicans, at least one Franciscan, and a Trinitarian. Later came Jesuits and more Franciscans. Thus, a Catholic presence was established in Georgia almost two centuries before the arrival of the English expedition which General James Oglethorpe led in 1732-1733.¹²

Somewhat later, in the seventeenth century, the land to be eventually known as Texas was opened up to exploration by the Spanish. Some thirty-six (some historians say thirty-eight) Franciscan missions were founded as centers of Catholic life in that land. In addition, the growth of the Catholic religion and its Mexican culture in Texas would become predominant, especially from Corpus Christi to San Antonio de Bexar and south to the Rio Grande. But as mentioned earlier, so also came to Texas Catholic Irish, settling notably the colonies of San Patricio de Hibernia and Refugio.¹³ They were followed by the several other nationalities already commented upon: the French, Germans, Polish, Italians, Czechs, and more.

Moving eastward from Texas, the French brought their Catholic heritage to Louisiana and the Mississippi River Valley to Mobile, Alabama. It is recorded that Jesuit Father Jacques Marquette, while accompanying the explorer Louis Jolliet down the Mississippi River, set foot on shore and ventured inland several times along the way, including brief stopovers in the future states of Missouri and Arkansas, bringing Catholic evangelization to those lands. The French explorative efforts continued with Robert Cavalier LaSalle going all the way to the Mississippi River's mouth in 1682. In 1718, Jean Baptiste LeMoyne Bienville, founded the city of New Orleans.

The Catholics of the American South, with a few exceptions such as those already mentioned, have been, until the post-World War II period, mostly a quiet minority, considered as a small island in a large lake of Protestantism. With some exceptions, especially among religious communities, they have been cognizant of this situation and behaved

overcautiously, hoping to “blend in” with society. Yet, to many Southerners they remained outsiders, the “pope’s people.”

As historians and others reflect upon the centuries-long tradition of Roman Catholicism and what it means to be a Southerner, Catholics of the South hopefully can speak of a more confident understanding of their Faith and their Southern roots. They must avoid the relativism that has come to dominate American society, as seen today in so many aspects of political, economic, entertainment, judiciary, and more “celebrity-oriented instead of Christ-centered” spheres of American life. These Catholics, as in other regions of the nation, must look with hope to the future based upon anchoring their values and virtues in the traditional Catholic teachings that matured over a period of many centuries. A serious and truth-seeking study of Catholics of the South, will inspire this kind of inquiry.

Appendix A: Historical Catholic Personages of the South

William H. Gaston, a famous judge and lawyer, and his mother Margaret, of New Berne, North Carolina

Fr. Jeremiah O’Niell of Savannah, Georgia—served there in the mid-nineteenth century

Fr. Thomas Price of North Carolina—founder of Maryknoll

Fr. Earl Niehaus of Xavier University, New Orleans—noted Catholic historian

Joanna England, sister of Bishop John England of Charleston, South Carolina

John England, first Bishop of Charleston, South Carolina, “the Light of the American hierarchy,” (Shea)

The John and Leticia Floyd family of Richmond, Virginia

John Kenna of Virginia/West Virginia—Confederate soldier and U.S. Senator

Stephen Mallory—Secretary of State for the Confederacy during the Civil War

Fr. Abram Ryan—the poet priest of the Confederacy

Fr. John Moore of Florida—served during the Civil War/Reconstruction era

Jeremiah J. O'Connell—mid-nineteenth century in Charleston, South Carolina

General Abbott Brisbane of Charleston, South Carolina—a convert to Catholicism, commander of Irish volunteers during the Seminole War, engineer who oversaw the construction of the Blue Ridge Railroad, teacher at the Citadel, tried to found a Catholic colony called St. Ignatius near Albany, Georgia

Dr. John Harwood Burt, from near Columbia, South Carolina—a convert, he and his wife brought many people into the Catholic Church

Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy—religious order from Ireland founded by Bishop England in Charleston

Jean-Marie Odin, CM, builder of the Catholic Church in Texas during the 1840s and 1850s, first Bishop of Galveston, second Archbishop of New Orleans

Mother Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy, founder of the Sisters of the Holy Spirit in San Antonio, and whose work spread from Texas through Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama

Dr. Carlos Eduardo Castaneda, noted Catholic Church historian and author of the classic seven volume study, *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas*

Roger Baudier, author of the classic study of Catholicism in Louisiana and author of *The Catholic Church in Louisiana*

John Mary Joseph Chanche, Sulpician and first Bishop of Natchez, Mississippi

Rev. James B. Sheeran, CSSR—Confederate Army chaplain

M.P. O'Connor—prominent state politician of Beaufort, South Carolina, elected to the U.S. Congress in 1879

Benedict Webb—Bardstown, Kentucky, journalist, historian, publisher of the *Catholic Advocate*

Clement Hill—U.S. Congressman from Louisville, Kentucky

Anthony Keily--Petersburg and Richmond, Virginia, editor

Lucius Bellinger Northrop—Charleston, South Carolina, convert and classmate at West Point and close friend of Jefferson Davis, Commissary General for the Confederacy until almost the end of the war

Patrick Walsh—Savannah, Georgia, editor-publisher of the diocesan newspaper, U.S. Senator

Theodore O'Hara—from Kentucky and then later, Mobile, Alabama; Southern intellectual, poet, and politician

Raphael Semmes—Charles County, Maryland, later Mobile, Alabama, naval officer and hero of the U.S.-Mexican War, commander of the Confederate Navy ship *Alabama* during the American Civil War

Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard—from New Orleans, ranking Confederate Army general, commanding officer at the firing on Fort Sumter

Appendix B: Topics and Movements on Catholic Life in the South

Immigration and Demographics (by state and century)

Cajuns and Creoles

Slave trade

Racial segregation

The Civil War

African American Catholics

Politicians

Literature

Labor unions

Miners

Catholics in principal cities

Clergy

Female religious orders and congregations

Knights of Columbus

Education: schools, colleges, universities

Civil rights movement

Notes

1. *The Education of Man: the Educational Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, edited and with an introduction by Donald and Idella Gallagher (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967; first printed by Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1962), 14. Cited in Patrick Foley, "The Historic Catholic Cultural Base of the American Southwest: The Spanish and the Irish," *Catholic Southwest: A Journal of History and Culture* 17 (2006): 35.
2. See *Catholics in the Old South: Essays on Church and Culture*, Randall M. Miller and Jon L. Wakelyn, eds. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University, 1983) passim. See also James J. Thompson, *The Church, The South and The Future* (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, Inc., 1988) passim.
3. For a discussion of this topic about the boundaries of the South during the time of the American Civil War see Robert Divine, et. al, *America Past and Present* fifth ed. (New York: Longman, 1999), 444.
4. Miller and Wakelyn, eds., *Catholics in the South: Essays in Church and Culture* passim.
5. Thompson, *The Church, The South and The Future* passim.
6. George J. Donahue, *John Henry Cardinal Newman* (The Stratford Company, 1927).
7. John Gilmary Shea, *A New History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (New York: P.J. Kennedy, 1886-1892), 527.
8. On Rapheal Semmes see James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989; originally published by Oxford University Press, 1988), 314, 15.
9. John J. Linn, *Reminiscences of Fifty Years in Texas* (New York: D. & J. Sadlier & Co., 1888) passim.
10. *The Letters of Marie Madeleine Hachard, 1727-28*, Myldred Masson Costa, trans. (New Orleans: Laborde Printing Company, 1974) passim.

11. On the Dominican Sisters see Sheila Hackett, O.P., *Dominican Women in Texas: From Ohio to Galveston and Beyond* (Houston, Texas: D. Armstrong Company, Inc.; Sacred Heart Convent of Houston, Texas, 1986) passim. For the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word of San Antonio, Texas, see Sister Mary Helena Finck, M.A., *The Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word of San Antonio, Texas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, doctoral dissertation, 1925) passim.

12. For the Catholic Spanish settlement of America, in particular the South, into the twentieth century, see Bishop David Arias, *The Spanish Roots of America* (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 2007) passim.

13. See Rachel Bluntzer Hebert, *The Forgotten Colony: San Patricio de Hibernia: The History, the People and the Legends of the Irish Colony of McMullen -McGloin* (Burnet, Texas: Eakin Press, 1981) passim.