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WONDERFUL PROGRESS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AMERICA.

BY CARDINAL GIBBONS

The first Sunday in the new year in the early stage of the new century affords an appropriate occasion for reviewing the history and progress of the Catholic religion in the United States during the nineteenth century. A retrospect of the Church in America would be manifestly incomplete if the name of the illustrious Archbishop Carroll were omitted. John Carroll was appointed first Bishop of Baltimore by Pope Pius VII in an apostolic brief dated November, 1789. The See of Baltimore then embraced the whole United States. He was consecrated August 15, 1789, in the chapel attached to Lutworth Castle, in Dorsetshire, England, the elegant home of Thomas Weld, a representative of an old and distinguished Catholic family. Mr. Weld had the honor of entertaining more than once King George III of England, and the friendship of the sovereign secured for his host religious concessions which were denied to other Catholic gentry and nobility in those days of persecution.

The consecrating Bishop was Dr. Walmesley, Vicar Apostolic of the London district. This prelate was not only a learned churchman, but also a scientist of marked distinction. When England had determined in 1750 to adopt the Gregorian calendar, Bishop Walmesley was associated with other scientific men in arranging the calendar and adapting it to the British realm. One of the acolytes that served at the altar on the day of consecration was the son of Mr. Weld, and this youth afterward became a distinguished Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church. The sermon on that occasion was preached by the Rev. Charles Plowden, an intimate friend of Dr. Carroll, and a member of the Society of Jesus. Father Plowden in his sermon uttered a prediction which has been amply fulfilled. He said that the day would come when the daughter would surpass the mother when the Church in America would outgrow in numbers and influence the Church in England.

His words have been abundantly verified for to-day the Catholic Church in the United States vastly exceeds the Church in England in the number of her hierarchy, her clergy and laity, and in the splendor of her institutions. regard the selection of Bishop Carroll as a most providential event for the welfare of the American Church. If a prelate of narrow views, a man not in sympathy and harmony with the young republic, had been chosen, the progress of religion would have been seriously impeded. It is true that the constitution has declared that none should be molested on account of religion nor in the free exercise thereof, but constitutional enactments would have been a feeble barrier to stem the tide of popular prejudice, unless these enactments were vindicated and sustained by the patriotic example of the chief ruler of the American Church.

John Carroll was the man for the occasion. We may apply to him the words spoken of John the Baptist:

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came for a witness to bear witness of the Light. He was a man of striking piety and enlightened zeal. These gifts endeared him to the faithful. He was a man of consummate tact, courteous, generous and unflinching charity. He enjoyed intimate relations with his fellow townsmen in the various walks of life without distinction of creed. He was deeply concerned in civil as well as in religious affairs. He was the prime mover, if not the actual founder, of the Maryland Historical Society, of Baltimore, which still exists among us, and one of his clergy was for some time its librarian. This interest which he took in social and literary improvements rendered him very popular with his fellow citizens.

Above all, he was a sturdy patriot and labored indefatigably for the success of American independence. In 1776 he accompanied Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Chase and Charles Carroll, of Carrollton, to Canada, on their mission to secure the co-operation of those colonies in the cause of independence. He was thoroughly in touch with the spirit of our institutions, and by these loyal sentiments he won the friendship of the first chief magistrate, the immortal Washington.

A short time before his consecration Dr. Carroll addressed a letter to the Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda, in which he reviewed the condition of religion in the new republic. He stated that the Catholic clergy numbered twenty-five, and he estimated

the Catholic population at 25,000, residing chiefly in Maryland, Pennsylvania and New York. The United States did not then include the Territory of Louisiana, which contained a few scattering Catholics, chiefly of a French descent.

At the present time, a century from the day of Bishop Carroll, the Catholic Church in the United States comprises a hierarchy of nearly 100 bishops, 12,500 priests and a Catholic population numbering from 12,000,000 to 14,000,000. If we include our Philippine and Porto Rican possessions, the number of Catholics under the aegis of the American flag will amount to fully 20,000,000.

Let us now consider to what providential agencies we are to ascribe this marvellous growth. Apart from natural increase and from conversions, we are indebted to the tide of immigration which has been steadily flowing to the shores of America. The first country to which this State owes a debt of gratitude for the faith is England; for Maryland, the mother State of the United States, was founded by English Catholics. Leonard Calvert, the brother of Lord Baltimore, together with a colony of English Catholic gentlemen and their families, sailed from Cowes in the Isle of Wight, in the Ark and the Dove, and landed on the banks of the Potomac in 1634. This colony was the first to establish on American soil the blessing of civil and religious liberty. In the mother country the colonists had drunk deeply the bitter waters of persecution, and now, when they enjoyed the luxury of freedom, instead of having recourse to measures of retaliation or of restricting this precious boon to themselves, they determined to share it with others. While the Puritans of New England persecuted other Christians, while the Episcopalians of Virginia proscribed Puritans, Catholic Maryland gave freedom and hospitality to Puritans and Episcopalians alike.

In the words of Bancroft: "The foundation of this colony of Maryland was peacefully and happily laid. Within six months it had advanced more than Virginia had in as many years. But far more memorable was the character of the Maryland institutions. Every other country in the world had persecuting laws, but through the benign administration of the government of the province, no person professing to believe in Jesus Christ was permitted to be molested on account of religion. Under the munificence and superintending mildness of Lord Baltimore a dreary wilderness was soon quickened with warming life and activity of prosperous settlements. The Roman Catholic who was oppressed by the laws of England was sure to find a peaceful asylum in the quiet harbors of the Chesapeake, and there, too, Protestants were sheltered from Protestant intolerance. Such were the beautiful auspices under which Maryland started into being. Its history is the history of benevolence, gratitude and toleration."

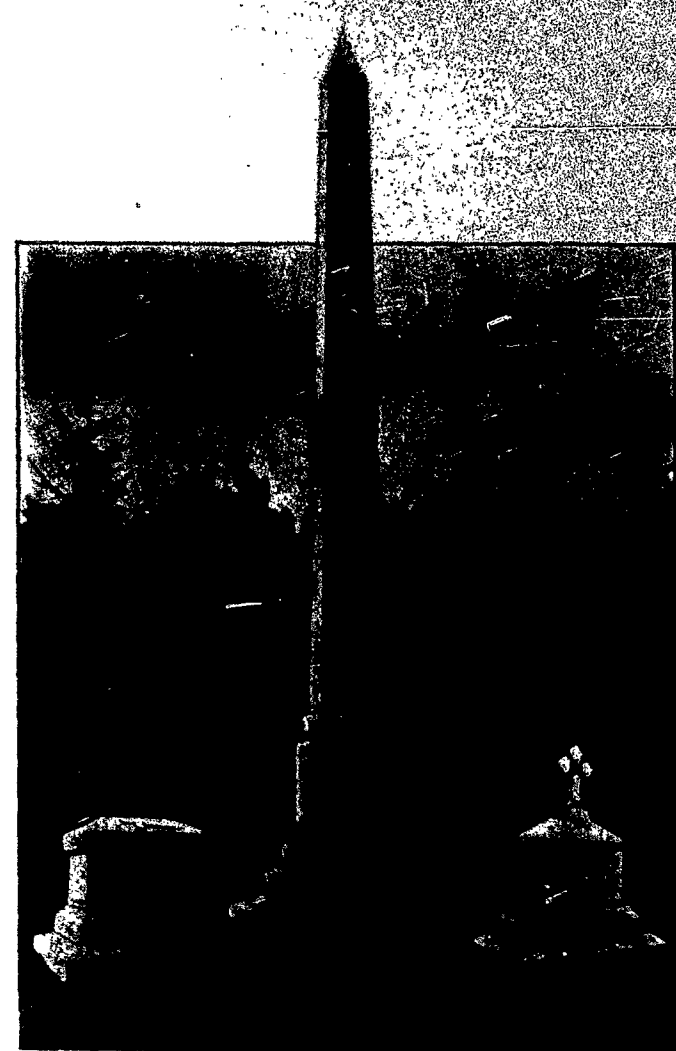
You will all, I am sure, agree with me that no country in Europe has contributed more efficiently to the establishment and growth of the Catholic religion among us than faithful Ireland. Whatever may have been the unhappy causes which have led to the expatriation of so many of Ireland's sons and daughters from their native soil, Almighty God has made their exile subservient to higher and holier purposes. I can safely affirm that there is scarcely a city or town throughout the United States where the Catholic religion has not been preached and sustained by priests and laymen of Irish birth or extraction. And the Irish missionary spirit is, perhaps, still more marked in Australia and through the vast extent of the British possessions. Ireland has been the apostle of the nations.

The Church in America is also indebted for her progress and development to the Catholic immigrants from Germany, Bohemia, Poland and other parts of Northern Europe. These colonists have inherited the national traits of their warlike ancestors who, in the fifth and sixth centuries, came down from the North and invaded Southern Europe.

There is another country across the Atlantic which deserves an honorable mention a country whose sons are the pioneers of religion on American soil. For three centuries after the discovery of our continent, heroic missionaries from Catholic France were laboring in evangelizing and civilizing the aboriginal tribes of North America. They explored our lakes, our rivers and mountains, carrying the torch of faith in one hand, the torch of science in the other, and they forwarded to the mother country charts of this continent which, even at this day, are regarded as marvels of topographical accuracy.

And thus we see that as every nation of Europe contributed a block of marble to the Washington Monument in the capital, so have the various countries of that continent contributed a column to the edifice of the Catholic Church in America. And as these marble slabs of the monument are chastened and whitened by time and the action of the climate so that they appear as if cut from the same quarry, in like manner the various nations congregated in this country, and assimilated into one homogeneous mass by religious training and social intercourse so as to form but one body in Christ.

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