

Catholic press met challenges to the church

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

If necessity is the mother of invention, then the Catholic press needs look no further for its origins than the hostile climate that greeted American Catholics in the 1820s.

A small minority in a Protestant land, U.S. Catholics in the 1820s faced suspicion and outright hostility from their fellow citizens, who had little that was good to say about Catholicism.

The secular press of the time reflected the bigotry of many Americans, according to Sister Mary Lonan Reilly's *The Catholic Press Association*, a historical overview of the U.S. and Canadian Catholic press and the professional organization that unites it.

"In early American history Catholics were few and, at best, only tolerated," Sister Reilly wrote. "Most secular papers felt no obligation to promote their cause or even to give them an unbiased hearing but Catholics were neither wealthy nor numerous enough to support their own publications, and their position was too precarious to risk jeopardizing by overt action."

Catholics took their first chances in the press through the efforts of Bishop John England, an Irish immigrant who led the diocese of Charleston, S.C. The bishop, a veteran journalist in his native land, founded *The United States Catholic Miscellany* in 1822.

The founder had attempted to explain Catholicism through comments to the secular press, but "he realized the need for an independent organ as an antidote to the public newspapers which often printed misrepresentations of the Catholic faith

and calumnies against the church," Sister Reilly noted.

The *Miscellany* published for 40 years and inspired the fledgling Catholic community to support more such periodicals as waves of Catholic immigrants, primarily from Ireland, came to U.S. shores.

The Pilot of Boston was the nation's first diocesan newspaper, founded in 1829, and has published continually since then. Among other notable Catholic newspapers founded before the Civil War was the *Freeman's Journal* in New York City, whose pages voiced the abolitionist sentiments of its editor, Father Edward Purcell.

"He sort of led the pack, if you will, of the Catholic press ... (in support) of the emancipation of blacks," remarked Monsignor John Tracy Ellis, one of several historical experts on the Catholic press to be interviewed in the 1986 videotape "Press Matters," produced by the Catholic Press Association.

Catholics in the 1850s and '60s were sharply divided over slavery, Monsignor Ellis said, noting that the New Orleans-based *La Propagateur Catholique* "was wildly confederate and thought that the Union was filled with wicked people."

In the mid-19th century, Catholic papers were usually independently owned and often sported such features as serialized Catholic short stories, according to Christopher J. Kauffman, editor of the Baltimore-based magazine, *U.S. Catholic Historian*.

Gradually, however, as dioceses began purchasing existing publications or establishing their own newspapers, the Catholic press became oriented toward the ethnic character of its readerships, dropping the



literary aspects in favor of a practical slant that called for pages of news from the immigrant Catholics' home countries.

Irish, Italian, Polish and German Catholic diocesan papers served the church in the latter part of the 19th century, when Catholic publications began calling for some association that could serve their needs. This desire reflected a more widespread yearning among Catholics to unite and defend themselves against the ever-present anti-Catholic bigotry in the country.

Along with the formation of several lay Catholic devotional and fraternal organizations, the first years of the 20th century witnessed several attempts at forming Catholic press syndicates, the last try successfully culminating in a Catholic press convention at Columbus, Ohio, in August, 1911.

That convention saw the birth of the Catholic Press Association, which claimed 47 charter members. Father Peter Blessing, a staff member of *Our Sunday Visitor*,

told the journalists that the association was sorely needed, Sister Reilly stated.

"Throughout the length and breadth of the land there is resounding a clarion call from an interested and intelligent laity for greater knowledge of what the church is doing and the reason why she is persecuted," the priest said.

Father Blessing's words mildly stated what would become a serious problem for the church in the 1920s. Notably, the Catholic press responded to his call by vigorously documenting church harassment and defamation by the Klu Klux Klan, the Protestant press and the Prohibition movement.

Charles McNeill, president of the CPA from 1954-56, noted that Catholic newspapers and magazines published stories on the Klan nearly every week in the 1920s.

"Our *Sunday Visitor's* ... whole front page was about the Klan," he said in the CPA videotape.

Monitoring the Klan gave way to monitoring social injustice as a task for the Catholic press in the 1930s, according to James O'Gara, editor of *Commonweal* magazine from 1967-1984. *The Catholic Worker*, founded by Dorothy Day in New York City, was the first journalistic byproduct of Catholic social-justice thinking, which preoccupied the church as it faced the claims of fascism and communism on the souls of desperate people throughout the world.

Despite the leftist slant of some Catholic papers, most of the Catholic press supported Generalissimo Francisco Franco in his fascist revolt against the Spanish government, O'Gara remarked, noting the abuses

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Church reflects the immigrants whom it served and who built it

By Sally Behan

Catholic News Service

Catholic Church history in the United States is a history of immigrants. From its beginning in 1789 when John Carroll was named its first bishop, the American church has grown with wave after wave of people from foreign countries.

The growth has been colorful — and marked by many cultures, gifts and problems.

Yet, for the most part, the American church's history — one of accommodation and acceptance of strangers — is one Catholics can be proud of, said Mercy Sister Dolores Liptak, historian and author of "Immigrants and Their Church."

"People tend to think the history was bad," she said in an interview with Catholic News Service. "But if you look at the evidence, it really wasn't. It was troubled sometimes because the problems were so

complicated and frankly because sometimes the immigrant groups themselves were totally out of order and unresponsive to the needs of the church at other times, of course, the hierarchy was to blame for the problems."

Sister Liptak, who is working at the Carmelite Sisters' archives in Baltimore, said the last two centuries of Catholic life can be divided rather neatly into the two centuries.

During the first 100 years, 1789-1889, "the missionaries were mainly the immigrants and the church was made up almost entirely of Irish and Germans," she said.

"As the century expands, the church becomes more and more Irish," she added. "And then comes the second 100 years, which is totally multi-ethnic. With it comes changes in the way the church sees itself."

Until the civil rights movement in the

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As the new century dawned, immigrants of all ages were drawn to America, where they helped to build a multi-ethnic church and nation.

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