

# U.S. Catholic Church bears Irish imprint

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rives a great part of its character from Irish Catholicism."

The root of this influence lies in the sheer number of Irish immigrants who fled their homes for the United States.

The great potato famine of the 1840s led to a massive influx of Irish immigrants to the United States. In his book *The Irish in America: 550-1972*, William Griffin noted that more than 780,000 Irish people emigrated to the United States between 1841-50. That number rose to more than 910,000 between 1851-60. An additional 1.9 million Irish immigrants arrived by 1900.

These immigrants joined the hundreds of thousands of Irish who already were living in the United States prior to the famine. Until the Italians surpassed them in the early Twentieth Century, the Irish constituted the largest ethnic group in the U.S. Catholic Church — and at a time when the U.S. church was being formed.

But it was more than just numbers that created the Irish impact on the U.S. Catholic Church.

As early as 1835, Bishop John England of the Diocese of Charleston S.C., commented, "The Irish are largely amalgamated with the Americans. Their principals, their dispositions, their notions of government, their language and their appearance become American very quickly, and they praise and prefer America to their oppressors at home."

Studies of the Irish influence on the U.S. Catholic Church consistently cite many of the factors Bishop England listed, especially lingual and governmental style.

In his book *To the Golden Door*, George Potter noted that because they already spoke English, the Irish — unlike other Catholic ethnic groups — moved quickly into American society and achieved success in business and politics.

Further, British rule of Ireland had prepared the Irish for the governmental style found in the United States, Potter wrote.

Because the British government had attempted to control the church in Ireland, Potter wrote, Irish-American Catholics "not merely opposed the political connection of church and state; they hated the very idea."

And, since they had been repressed in Ireland, Potter said, the Irish "had won religious rights by united combative agitation." Thus, he explained, whenever anti-Catholicism arose in the United States — such as the know-nothing movement of the 1850s — the Irish helped lead the fight for Catholic rights and religious tolerance.

This combativeness manifested itself



File photo  
Bishop Bernard John McQuaid was named first bishop of the Rochester diocese on March 3, 1868.

not only in battles outside the church, but also in disputes within the church, Potter added.

In the early days of the United States, for example, many Catholic clergy were of French origin. As the number of Irish immigrants grew, however, the Irish objected to the French priests' broken English and began to demand Irish priests.

Their desire for Irish priests was so strong, Potter wrote, that when Frenchman John Dubois was named Bishop of New York in 1825, the Irish stopped contributing to the church. The impasse did not clear up until an Irish Bishop — namely John Hughes — was appointed coadjutor of the diocese in 1838.

For the Irish, however, the priest was more than just a man who spoke their own language.

As John Cogley explained in his book *Catholic America*, priests had been among the best educated, most honored and most trusted men in Irish Catholic society.

"The priest in the old country," Cogley noted, "was looked to for direction and leadership in all aspects of life because of his superior education, and this dependence was carried over in American Catholic communities."

And with Irish domination of U.S. clerical and episcopal ranks, this Irish attitude toward priests had a long-term effect on the U.S. church, Cogley con-



File photo  
Bishop John England, the first bishop of Charleston, S.C., was born in Cork, Ireland, in 1786.

tended.

It was this Irish attitude toward religious leaders, Cogley explained, that encouraged bishops, priests and religious to run the church and its institutions as they saw fit — without "interference" from the laity.

"The laity," he wrote, "were brought up to mind their own affairs and leave ecclesiastical matters to their clerical betters."

Cogley added that this situation did not change until the Second Vatican Council placed greater emphasis on the role of the church's laity.

Priests were also called upon to build church structures in the United States, William V. Shannon observed in his book *The American Irish*. Unlike some other ethnic groups, he explained, the Irish had lacked wealthy patrons or noble families to sponsor construction of churches in their homeland. Thus, they learned to rely on themselves to raise money — a skill they would later find useful in the United States.

This belief that the faithful were responsible for funding church operations required that the priest — as leader of the community — demonstrate ability in raising funds and managing money, Shannon noted.

"They needed the administrator's characteristic gifts of energy, perseverance, enthusiasm and practical vision," Shannon wrote. "The Irish Catholic clergy stamped the church in America with these habits of mind."

Thus the U.S. clergy became preoccupied with construction projects, necessitated in part by the large influx of Catholic immigrants. Shannon observed that this preoccupation with building left the clergy — and consequently the U.S. church — with little time to develop their intellectual life. He observed that European Catholics came to view "American Catholics as materialistic, parochial and culturally impoverished."

"The Irish were notoriously unconcerned about aesthetics — the churches they built in America are generally models of mediocre architecture," Cogley acknowledged, "but their urge toward physical expansion was remarkable from the very beginning. The Irish-American hierarchy — brick-and-mortar bishops almost to a man — had their people behind them when they

built churches, seminaries, schools, colleges, universities, hospitals and orphanages by the hundred."

As Carl Wittke noted in his book *The Irish in America*, the Irish — with their awareness of suffering from their own lives in Ireland and as immigrants — were conscious of the need for such institutions as orphanages and hospitals. Noting that the institutions they created were open to all people — regardless of race or religion — Wittke suggested that the network of benevolent institutions is one of the legacies of Irish dominance of the U.S. church.

In her book, *Immigrants and their Church*, Sister Dolores Liptak, RSM, also noted that the Irish were particularly sensitive to economic oppression because of their own suffering in their homeland. Thus, she wrote, the Irish Catholic hierarchy in the United States tended to support workers' efforts to organize labor unions and work for social reform.

But beyond architecture and social activism, the Irish also influenced the style of worship in the U.S. Catholic Church.

Thomas Day contends that during the years of repression in Ireland, the Irish had been forced to conduct their services in secret, without "hymn singing, processions, or other conspicuous displays of devotion."

They brought this style of worship — the "Immense Irish Silence" as Day described it — with them to the United States. This style eventually became the norm for the church, he said, observing that many Catholics today remain uncomfortable with the enthusiastic worship styles of other ethnic traditions.

Sister Liptak pointed to this same conclusion, writing that in the United States, "both liturgical worship and prayer reflected the Irish preference for a somewhat plain ceremonial style."

"Even para-liturgical services, such as novenas, benediction, or the celebration of feast days which were held in Irish-American parishes reflected the same—overly formal, repetitive pattern," Sister Liptak wrote.

Irish Catholics also introduced a pattern of moral thinking on the U.S. church, Sister Liptak observed.

"The Irish penchant for certain rigid Jansenistic interpretations of morality influenced Catholics — this was often a consequence of the massive parochial education directed by religious teachers of Irish background," wrote Sister Liptak, whose own congregation, the Sisters of Mercy, was imported into this country from Ireland.

"Both in the classroom and from the pulpit, generations of Catholics learned about sin and guilt or, for example, how salvation was all too easily lost because of sins of the flesh," she wrote.

Cogley observed that the Irish clergy did appear to have "a preoccupation with sex," and that Irish Catholicism "put a central emphasis on strict obedience to ecclesiastical law and on sexual probity."

But in spite of such constraining influences, Sister Liptak noted that the Irish influence on the Catholic Church in the United States had in many ways been a positive one.

"The Irish," Sister Liptak wrote, "had built an extraordinarily vital church."

"Irish-Americans," she concluded, "had successfully addressed and proposed solutions for some of the most difficult social problems facing American society, and they had presented the nation with a faith whose beauty of expression and soundness of principles gave fitting testimony to its historic grandeur."

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