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## Revolution

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"Here is everything which can lay hold of the eye, ear and imagination — everything which can charm and bewitch the simple and the ignorant. I wonder how Luther ever broke the spell" (*The Adams Papers*, edited by L. H. Butterfield).

Still, by the end of the American Revolution in 1783, Catholics had gained acceptance as important participants in the rebel cause and, in fact, even crucial to its support. How this came about is a fascinating tale of politics making strange bedfellows, even among fellows who consider one another heretics.

## Whose cause?

In 1775, Catholics made up about 1 percent of the colonies' population, 25,000 in a land of 2.5 million. With such tiny numbers, they should not have had much impact on the Revolution. Yet, because they were concentrated in two states crucial to the rebellion — Pennsylvania and Maryland — they wound up playing a role somewhat disproportionate to their numbers.

Additionally, Washington happened to be one of the few founding fathers who did not openly display anti-Catholic bigotry, and made Catholics officers in his army. None were allowed to become officers among the British forces.

According to several historians, Catholics in 1775 had many good reasons not to support the Revolution. Save for those in Pennsylvania, they did not possess the right to vote, nor were they allowed to hold most public offices. Given that the colonies were filled mostly with Protestants who often loathed "Popery" — as well as some deists who questioned religion in general — Catholics were not exactly high on anyone's list of future full citizens.

On top of widespread anti-Catholic prejudice, among the British government acts the founding fathers considered "intolerable" was the 1774 Quebec Act. This act allowed for the toleration of — as well as government support for — the Catholic Church in Canada. The British had taken Canada from France in the French and Indian War ending in 1763, and the Protestant colonists considered the Quebec Act a betrayal by the British.

In October 1775, the Continental Congress sent an address to King George, criticizing the act for establishing "an absolute government and the Roman Catholic religion throughout those vast regions, that border on the westerly and northerly boundaries of the free protestant English settlements" (*Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789*, edited by Worthington

Chauncey Ford).

Interestingly, however, those loyal to Great Britain also used anti-Catholic arguments in favor of their cause. For example, Joseph Galloway, a colonist loyal to the Crown, wrote that American independence would actually leave the new nation vulnerable to Europe's other major power, Catholic France. The French might then be able to impose "the horrors of popish superstition" on citizens bereft of British protection (*A Candid Examination of the Mutual Claims of Great Britain and the Colonies*).

Choosing between the rebels and the king seemed, on the surface, not much of a choice for Catholics, according to one historian.

"(Catholics) had no compelling reason to be grateful for their past treatment by the British, nor excessively hopeful for their status in an independent American state," Raymond Kupke wrote in an article on "Catholics and the American Revolution" for *The Encyclopedia of American Catholic History* (1997, The Liturgical Press). "By and large the Catholics made their decision for and against independence for individual reasons, and many opted for the patriot cause."

## Catholics to the rescue

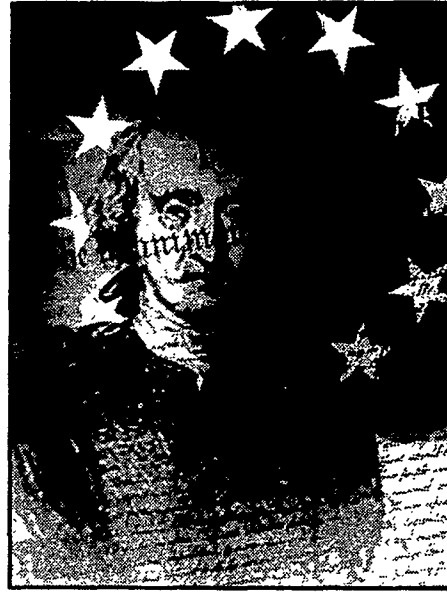
A number of factors led to Catholics both supporting the Revolution and being accepted by their Protestant compatriots. Military aid from Catholic France, along with Catholic Spain's entry into the war on the rebel side, eventually helped turn the tide of the mostly Protestant colonists' war against their Protestant motherland. And it was this aid, along with the distinguished service many Catholics gave to the rebel cause, that began to change, or at least soften, anti-Catholic attitudes.

Even before France entered the war, Washington had banned his troops from celebrating "Pope Day," on which revelers burned papal effigies. He noted that such anti-Catholic activity would only drive Catholics away from the patriots' cause.

John Adams visited a Catholic cathedral in Brussels, Belgium, during the war years, and wrote to his wife that maybe he had been "rash and unreasonable" in "cursing the knavery of the priesthood and the brutal ignorance of the people."

Adams seemed sincere in his repentance, but loyalists had a field day cynically pointing out how formerly anti-Catholic rebels suddenly changed their tune when France agreed to help the revolutionaries. Yet, while highlighting the inconsistencies of the rebels' rhetoric may have influenced Catholic Canadians to spurn the rebel cause, it apparently had less of an effect on Catholic Americans.

"In the emergency, Catholics and



Frenchmen were no longer the ogres of old," wrote Father Charles H. Metzger, SJ, in his 1962 book *Catholics and the American Revolution: A Study in Religious Climate* (Loyola University Press). "They might prove to be acceptable; they should be tolerated, even patronized; their aid was desirable."

## Roman rebels

By far, the most important Catholic in the rebel cause was Charles Carroll, a wealthy Marylander whom Washington and others once even considered for the presidency of the United States. Carroll had distinguished himself as a friend of the patriots in an exchange of letters with a loyalist in a Maryland newspaper in 1773. This loyalist, Charles Dulany, resorted to pointing out that Carroll was not a Protestant, therefore not a true citizen, when it appeared Carroll's arguments were winning the day with readers.

The only Catholic to sign the Declaration of Independence, Carroll was the cousin of Father John Carroll, who later went on to become archbishop of Baltimore, the founding see of the U.S. Catholic Church. Both Carrolls traveled to Quebec with Franklin in 1775 to secure Canada's aid against Britain, a mission that failed miserably, but that nonetheless saw the formation of a lifelong friendship between Franklin and the cleric.

The priest's brother, Daniel Carroll, served in the Maryland Senate, and was a signer of both the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution. Other Carrolls joined their fellow Catholics in serving with the rebel military forces.

The revolutionary forces boasted a number of Catholics in prominent positions. For example, John Barry, considered the father of the U.S. Navy, was a

Catholic who captured the first British ship to be taken by the revolutionaries. Stephen Moylan served as aide de camp to Washington and quartermaster general of the Continental Army, eventually attaining the rank of brigadier general. Three of his brothers were involved in noncombatant support of the war, both at home and in Europe.

Dr. Joseph Cauffman Jr. served as a medical officer on a U.S. frigate and was killed. Meanwhile, Mary Waters, an Irish-born nurse, served in the rebel military hospitals.

And three of the most prominent Europeans in the Continental Army were Catholics: the Marquis de Lafayette, engineer Thaddeus Kosciusko and cavalry officer Casimir Pulaski.

Even priests were caught up in revolutionary issues. Father Ferdinand Farmer of Philadelphia politely refused to serve as chaplain to a regiment of Catholic loyalists. He later went on to become the first priest to hold public office in the United States, as a trustee of the University of Pennsylvania. Priests in Maryland supported the war effort from their plantations, and some saw their homes destroyed by the British Army.

But what was it that motivated these Catholics to take a chance on a revolution led by so many men hostile to their faith? In part, it may have been the blunders of the British, whose forces plundered Catholic-owned farms without discriminating between friend and foe, according to Father Metzger. But there were other, far deeper motives as well, he wrote.

"(Catholics) may have been moved by the hope that a new page of history was being written, and that out of this ordeal understanding and toleration might emerge to replace the inequities of the past and extend into the future."

On that note, Charles Carroll seems to confirm the soundness of Father Metzger's educated guess. He wrote these words in the last years before his death in 1832, when he was the only living signatory of the Declaration of Independence.

"When I signed the Declaration of Independence, I had a view not only of our independence of England but the toleration of all sects, professing the Christian religion, and communicating to them all great rights."

EDITORS' NOTE: In addition to the books cited as sources for this article, the writer also used as a source *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States*, by Father James Hennessey, SJ, (1981 Oxford University Press). The original spellings in colonial-era quotations have been retained.

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