

Roman Catholicism

From the first Catholic settlers in colonial Maryland to the recent influx of Spanish-speaking and Asian Catholics, "southern" Catholics have traditionally occupied an ambivalent place in the region as they struggled to balance a universal faith with their own peculiar ethnoreligious differences in a social environment that often has been hostile toward them. After the American Revolution the American Catholic church, composed of roughly 35,000 native Catholics located largely in Maryland, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania and under the leadership of John Carroll, the first American bishop (1790), had sought social and cultural assimilation into American life. By the mid-19th century, however, the American Catholic church had veered away from the genteel Anglo-American Catholicism of John Carroll's generation. The annexation of "Latin" Louisiana and the Gulf areas and, more importantly, massive European immigration, chiefly Irish and German, beginning in the 1830s, fixed the multiethnic character of American Catholicism thereafter. Ethnic disputes over liturgical rites, ecclesiastical jurisdictions, and customs came with immigration. They racked Norfolk, Charleston, Richmond, and New Orleans congregations in the early 19th century and prefigured more serious divisions within the American church throughout the century.

With force of numbers and an English-speaking advantage, the Irish gained control of the American church hierarchy. Coming during the devotional revolution underway in Ireland at mid-century, which stressed piety through regular devotions and worship and respect for clerical authority, the Irish had the energy and discipline to impose their ways on the church. Indeed, they largely subdued German elements in Baltimore and New Orleans during the 19th century. In lower Louisiana, however, the European immigrants confronted an entrenched French Catholic population heavily tinged with Continental French liberalism and with Spanish and African cultural strains. The French Creoles lost the contest for control over the church, but enough Creole customs survived in the increasingly austere American church to give Louisiana Catholicism a Mediterranean flavor that exists even today.

Without endorsing ethnic pluralism, the American church muted cultural tensions by establishing nationality parishes, in effect conceding a measure of cultural diversity in parish life while it insisted on greater uniformity in formal church practices and pushed Americanization through education. The cultural development of the church in the South, however, diverged from the national pattern when immigration to the South virtually ceased after the Civil War. A period of relative internal stability in the southern church followed the end of the war and lasted through World War II. Overall, the southern church escaped the cultural and social tremors of the "new immigration" wrenching Catholicism in northern communities, except in Louisiana, where the arrival of southern Italians to work in the sugar fields in the 1890s created fresh cultural tensions in the local church for a generation. By moderating its internal ethnic and ecclesiastical stresses, the southern church slipped into a respectable obscurity in the region until the 1960s.

Catholics remained a religious minority everywhere in the South outside of Louisiana, while Catholicism became the majority religion in the North. Conscious of its minority status in the overwhelmingly evangelical Protestant South, the church assumed a low political and social profile. The Catholic emphasis on personal salvation through the sacramental system tended to deflect Catholic concern from social action, and from John Carroll until Vatican II (1962-65) church leaders preached social and political accommodation with the host society—as much to focus their resources on building a church establishment as to fend off nativism and anti-Catholic prejudices. Southern church leaders provided scriptural justifications for slavery and a conservative social order in the antebellum period, supported secession and the Confederacy, inveighed against Republican rule during Reconstruction, and instituted their own form of Jim Crowism in the 1890s—all in conformity with the dominant regional values and practices. Such actions did not wholly dispel Protestant suspicions concerning Catholic loyalties, however, for nativism and anti-Catholicism flared in the Populist movement in the 1890s and lingered through the 1930s as a political factor in southern life. Effective lay Catholic political resistance—the creation of the Georgia Laymen's League to combat the Ku Klux Klan, for example—and the church's accommodationist policies on race and social issues countered such external threats, but the persistent, if often only latent, anti-Catholic temperament of evangelical Protestantism in the region inclined the Catholic church toward a policy of social enclosure. Concerned about the corrupting influence of the Protestant Bible, hymns, and teaching in public schools, for example, Catholic bishops in the late 19th century began to build a parochial system in their dioceses. Church-sponsored devotional societies, religious and recreational organizations, and the recruitment and training of native-born southerners for religious vocations solidified the southern Catholic culture, although the church's effort to match secular society in social services and schooling led to a proliferation of institutions that sapped the meager financial endowments of an always-poor southern church.

In the 20th century the ideology of southern Agrarianism reduced differences between Protestants and Catholics in the South and, thereby, increased the acceptance of Catholics in southern society. The conservative social views of Catholics increasingly assumed an important place in the region's general critique of modernism. Southern Catholic writers—especially Kate Chopin, Flannery O'Connor, William Alexander Percy, Katherine Anne Porter, and Allen Tate—shared a framework of values that was both Catholic and southern. They distrusted abstraction and modern liberalism, particularly its celebration of the rootless individual in search of the American dream; evidenced a strong sense of place; and praised organic, communal society. Like so many non-Catholic southern writers, they idealized a simpler southern past and decried the insidious secularism of industrial, urban America.

Catholicism, which taught the sanctity of marriage and family, also easily allied with the host society in attacking divorce and abortion—moral positions that contributed to the thawing of relations between Catholics and evangelical Protestant groups. During the 1970s, for example, several regional Southern Baptist/Roman Catholic conferences were held in a mutual effort both to undo generations of stereotypes and mistrust that had sepa-

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rated the two churches and, secondarily, to build a consensus for social action. The improved position of Catholics in the region's public life in recent years further testified to Protestant tolerance of Catholics and to Catholic integration into southern life. If Catholics did not quite belong in the Protestant South, they were no longer universally condemned as wholly antithetical to it.

Yet, even as Catholicism gained acceptance in the South, liberal forces swept into the church and the region to loosen the anchors of social conservatism and political accommodationism. More than anything else, the church's social posture shifted in response to Vatican II, which, among other influences, modified church hierarchical authority by calling for greater lay initiative in devotions and discipline. It also altered the ritual foundation of Catholic conservatism and cultural consensus by modernizing liturgical practices. Tradition gave way to change, and often confusion, in worship and social vision. Catholics reared in a tradition of docility groped to separate new truths from old errors in belief.

In the South, papal denunciation of racism in 1958 and insistence on social justice after Vatican II posed immediate challenges to local Catholic and southern habits. Catholic segregationist policy had begun to crumble in the late 1940s and early 1950s because of the actions of individual prelates in Washington, St. Louis, Raleigh, and Nashville in desegregating parochial schools, but the rush came in the 1960s when Catholic school desegregation moved at a pace faster than that in the public sector. Desegregation of other Catholic institutions soon followed. Desegregation, imposed as it was from above, met stiff resistance from white Catholic laity, particularly in the Deep South, where many persons defied church orders. The continued practice of segregated worship virtually everywhere in the South revealed the fragmented nature of the new Catholic church and the tug between church authority and social norms among southern Catholics. The involvement of Catholic religious leaders in the civil rights movement further alienated southern communicants from the official church, even though many southern bishops opposed civil rights activity.

Similarly, the church's grip on lay thinking weakened as parochial schools became battlegrounds of social change. With fewer nuns, brothers, and priests in teaching positions the influence of lay instructors, who did not always share common social values, increased. The creeping secularism in Catholic education led some pastors to question openly the necessity of parochial schools at all. The floodtide of Spanish-speaking migrants and immigrants in the last few decades, combined with the migration of northern-born and often better-educated Catholics into the southern Sunbelt, introduced new cultural stresses into the church while pulling it toward new, non-southern definitions of social concern. As sections of the South have become "northernized" by industrialization and ethnic pluralism, so too has the southern Catholic church.

On the face of it, the Catholic imprint on the South has been negligible. A small, scattered Catholic population has not developed a regional influence. Within areas

of Catholic concentration, however (particularly Louisiana, the lower Gulf region, Florida, Texas, and parts of Maryland and Kentucky), Catholicism continues to inform local cultural and social life. In lower Louisiana, especially, where well over one-third of the population is Catholic, Catholic religious symbols abound in the practice of regular nightly prayers, and in more public, if secularized, expressions such as the annual rice and sugarcane festivals, the Yambilee, the blessing of the shrimp fleets, and even Mardi Gras, which is not without religious overtones.

The contribution of diverse, immigrant Catholic cultures to southern character remains incalculable because it is so elusive and fluid. Catholics have always existed as both outsiders and insiders in southern culture, and the tension between their public and private roles has produced subregional permutations wherever Catholics have lived in significant numbers. On the negative side, cultural differences between Catholic and Protestant reinforced or forged stereotypes and rivalries that have threatened the region's social harmony. The accommodation of the Catholic church and its people to southern social and political norms, in addition to the higher religiosity of southern Catholics compared to their northern counterparts, paradoxically reaffirms the evangelical Protestant core of southern culture with its stress on personal religious accountability and conservative social values.

See also ETHNIC LIFE: Nativism; / French; Germans; Irish; Italians; Mexicans; Spanish; LITERATURE: / O'Connor, Flannery; Porter, Katherine Anne; Tate, Allen; WOMEN'S LIFE: / Chopin, Kate

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