

Catholic Colony-Making in 19th Century America

Thomas Storck

It is easier to be a Catholic here than in the mixed and busy push of the towns and cities.

—John T. Reily in 1885, commenting on Conewago, a very early Catholic settlement near the Maryland border in Pennsylvania.

From the nascent community in first century Jerusalem, which held all things in common (Acts 2:42-47), to efforts of today, Catholics have very often sought to establish explicitly Catholic communities, communities in which they could live out the Faith by establishing a way of life which corresponds to the teaching of the Gospel. And in some circumstances there was the additional reason that such separate communities were made necessary by the active hostility and persecution of surrounding society. In nineteenth-century America both the desire to live a way of life more in keeping with the Faith as well as the hostility of the surrounding Protestant society gave the impetus for the founding of many Catholic communities, and in this article I will describe a few of them. This is certainly not an exhaustive account of Catholic colonization in the United States during the last century, but simply a brief survey and a highlighting of some of the episodes that seem to me most interesting.

The original European settlers of North America were, of course, Spanish Catholics, and those coming later included the Catholic French, and the English Catholics of Maryland. So in a sense all of their settlements could be called Catholic colonization. Moreover, these European Catholics evangelized the Native Americans and in many cases established Catholic communities for them. The French, for example, in order to protect their Indian converts from the still-pagan atmosphere of their homelands, set up explicitly Catholic Indian villages near Montreal, and in Florida Indians converted by Spanish priests dwelt in Catholic communities.

In the English colonies the largest body of Catholics was, of course, the Maryland settlers. There, too, what might be called Catholic communities were established for the Native Americans, for the second Lord Baltimore, Cecilius Calvert, forbade Europeans to settle on lands set aside for the Indians and gave these new converts Jesuits for their spiritual ministrations. Maryland, however, had had a Protestant majority from its beginning, and in time the Protestants seized control of the colony's government and began perse-

cuting Catholics. After 1688 this policy became permanent, so some of the Maryland Catholics fled across the border to Pennsylvania and established a series of settlements centered on Conewago Chapel in Adams County. Toward the end of the 18th century these Conewago Catholics spawned the next Catholic community, the settlements in Cambria County, Pennsylvania. One Michael McGuire, a Catholic from the Conewago area, who had been an officer in the Continental army during the Revolutionary War, founded a settlement in what is now eastern Cambria County, Pennsylvania, just west of Altoona. In 1799 Fr. Demetrius Gallitzin (1770-1840), a former Russian nobleman, a convert and one of the first priests ordained in the United States, visited McGuire's community and decided to buy land for further Catholic settlement in the area. His first and main community was Loretto, where he started a school, an orphanage, a store and a sawmill. Later other nearby towns were also colonized. Fr. Gallitzin would buy land from the government and resell it cheaply to his settlers. He spent all his money on his colonies and even anticipated his inheritance from Russia and spent it all before he found out that he would be disinherited under Russian law because of his Catholic ordination. Cambria County is, in large part because of Fr. Gallitzin's efforts, one of four counties in Pennsylvania whose population is over 50% Catholic, and, fittingly, Fr. Gallitzin's tomb is prominently placed in front of the parish church in Loretto.

Pennsylvania was the site of other Catholic settlements also. New Baltimore (originally Harman's Bottom) in Somerset County, was begun about 1826; Silver Lake in Susquehanna County was established in 1827; Neppenoe Valley in Lycoming County in 1836 by German Catholics; and among the more interesting, St. Mary's in Elk County, begun in 1842 by German Catholics from Philadelphia and Baltimore. Like Cambria County, Elk County's population is over half Catholic today, and St. Mary's is also deservedly well-known as the home of Straub beer.

There were many other attempted colonies, successful and unsuccessful, especially in different areas of the Midwest, from Ohio to Minnesota in the north and to Arkansas in the south. Many of these communities were founded by German-speaking Catholics from Switzerland, Austria and Germany, which at that time was divided into a number of independent states. In western Ohio German Catholics settled a belt along the Indiana border from Darke County north to Putnam County. Today this area is still a region of heavy

Catholic population, and the only two counties in Ohio with populations over fifty percent Catholic, Mercer and Putnam, are both within this area of German Catholic settlement. One village within this range of Catholic colonization is Delphos, Ohio, partly in Allen County and partly in Van Wert County. The colony at Delphos was begun in 1836 when a German priest, Fr. John Bredeick, sent his brother Frederick to America to establish a German Catholic community. Frederick Bredeick purchased 92 acres for the future Delphos in an area that was already being settled by planned German Catholic communities. The first group of 42 people left Germany in August of 1842 and began clearing land for the future town the next spring. Fr. Bredeick, who was himself unable to leave Germany until 1844, had sent a second group of colonists in 1843, and he himself finally arrived the next year with a third group. Although from an early date non-Catholics have lived in Delphos, even today the Catholic high school, St. John's, is larger than the public high school.

Much of the southern part of this territory, centering in Mercer County, was colonized under the direction of a remarkable German priest, Fr. Francis Brunner. Like Fr. Gallitzin in Pennsylvania, Fr. Brunner was accused of being dictatorial in his methods and in the control of his settlers. But one can say on their behalf that such dedicated priests laid foundations that have lasted. If the Faith is dying in Mercer County, Ohio, and Cambria County, Pennsylvania, it is due to the problems in the larger Church and in the society, not to anything lacking in their founders' efforts or vision.

Another German community established in the Midwest that was quite a bit different from Delphos was St. Nazianz, Wisconsin, in Manitowoc County. This community was planned and established by Fr. Ambrose Oswald (1801-1873) in 1854. If people found the rule of Fr. Gallitzin or Fr. Brunner oppressive what would they have thought of Fr. Oswald's community? St. Nazianz was organized as kind of membership community, with a constitution called the Statutes consisting of twenty-nine sections. It included the following:

Section 8. Immorality and intemperance shall in no way be tolerated.

Section 9. The public morality shall be guarded by the Ephorate, which shall consist of twelve elders and the priest of the place.

Section 10. The Ephorate in its quality as Senate shall at the same time constitute the board of elders, which, together with the priest, shall manage the public affairs.

Section 11. Such persons as act contrary to the rules and public morality shall be warned three times by the Ephorate, and if without effect, shall be excluded from the association.

Section 15. The mode of living will be in common as much as possible.

Section 18. Swearing, cursing, quarrelling, fighting, suing, cheating, unchasteness and rudeness, contrary to a Christian life, will not be tolerated, over which the Ephorate shall guard carefully.

Section 20. Each member shall be assigned a position in the parish for which he shall be found suited.

Section 28. The priest of the place is president of the Ephorate. The president of the Senate holds the position of Mayor. The president and senators are elected by the parish.

At first glance some of these rules might seem oppressive indeed, but I think that most of them would have been bearable in the context of an intentional Christian community. The rules also contained a strong purpose for social justice, including the following:

Section 6. The care of the poor, invalids, orphans and others in need shall be provided for, so that the poor shall receive the same care as the rich.

Section 7. Aid shall be given to one another in the obtaining of the most necessary things according to the instructions of the elders. No one shall suffer innocently. Each one shall receive aid when in trouble as soon as possible.

Section 22. Suppression and oppression will not be tolerated.

Unlike many 19th-century European immigrants, Fr. Oswald's intentions were not primarily economic. He frequently told his flock, "We did not come to America to become rich, but to save our souls."

After Fr. Oswald's death in 1873, some dissident members of the community initiated a lawsuit to get some of the community's money and start a separate association. Over ten years later the legal battles were settled, with the rebel members getting only a small portion of what they had originally demanded. Toward the turn of the century membership in the original Association had dwindled, and the inhabitants, with the aid of the bishop of the diocese, invited the Salvatorian Order (S.D.S.) to take over the parish. The Salvatorians founded a seminary there and still remain.

In general the German Catholic immigrants and colonists were better off financially and better organized than were the Irish and the later arrivals, such as Italians and Slavs. The Irish were fleeing from persecution and famine and many of the eastern Europeans and Italians were very poor and were exploited on their arrival in the United States. But the Germans, more likely to be prosperous farmers or craftsmen, usually prepared their settlements well in advance and sent

over agents to check out conditions and buy land. However, there was one organized attempt to settle Irish Catholics in farming communities away from the big cities of the east coast. This was the Irish Catholic Colonization Association.

The Irish Catholic Colonization Association was founded in 1879 and ceased functioning in 1891. Its purpose was to settle Irish Catholics in the rural south and west and move them out of urban slums. The Association bought 8,000 acres in Minnesota and 25,000 acres in Nebraska, although only a few families were actually settled on the land; only 150 families, for example, colonized the Nebraska tract. The Association also attempted to sponsor a colony in Arkansas, St. Patrick's, but legal difficulties in purchasing the land hindered its easy development, though some families did settle there. It is interesting to note, though, that some of those immigrating to Arkansas were from Kentucky, Missouri and Pennsylvania, that is, they already lived in rural areas and were not as much in need of escaping the cities as many other Irish.

Colonizing efforts by Catholics in the 19th century should be viewed in the context of other such enterprises, for 19th-century America was full of attempts to found planned communities, some with more long-lasting results than others. Everyone is aware of the Mormons founding Salt Lake City, but before setting out into the wilderness they had had another community at Nauvoo, Illinois, from which they were driven out by hostile mobs. Other 19th-century communities in the U.S. included New Harmony, Indiana, Zoar, Ohio, Oneida, New York, Brook Farm in Massachusetts and the Shaker communities. Some of these were religious and others secular utopian or socialist.

For a member of a group which claims to know the most important truths the appeal of a community is obvious. The nexus of community in the United States is mainly negative, that is, the country is founded on freedom and limited government. But freedom leaves room for action based on numerous and contradictory desires, whether for money, sexual pleasure, or for one sort of religion or another. With Americans having so many differing ideals there is not much of a place for cohesive community here. But for those with a religious or even a political creed that rises above such disparate and dissipative desires, there is naturally a longing for a life based on that creed, i.e., for a community explicitly founded on what its adherents believe to be true, rather than on the somewhat boring ideal of everyone pursuing happiness in a thousand different ways. American society from the beginning has put religion in an inferior place by making it a wholly private and individual affair. Whatever religion a person wanted, that was fine, so long as he did not attempt to intrude upon others. But in so saying, this perennial American creed proclaimed that in what was really important for the nation as a whole, religion, or at least any particular religion, would play no part. This can hardly be acceptable for anyone who really believes, so to escape such banality communities are founded. As Catholics we have additional reasons: the

knowledge that our Faith is true, and a long history of dealing with a multitude of political arrangements and of establishing communities of many kinds.

The American government, moreover, expects its citizens to play by the rules. In the fall of 1789 Father John Carroll, shortly to become the first Catholic bishop in English-speaking North America, and four important Catholic laymen, including Charles and Daniel Carroll, addressed a letter of congratulations to President George Washington. A few months later Washington replied by letter in a conciliatory manner. But our first President's reply included the following sentence: "As mankind becomes more liberal, they will be more apt to allow, that all those who conduct themselves as worthy members of the Community are equally entitled to the protection of civil Government." Though no doubt meant in a generous sense, perhaps today we can see the mailed fist under the velvet glove here more clearly than could our brethren the Carrolls. For it appears more and more to be the case that in order to be considered "worthy members of the Community" we must keep our mouths shut about abortion, homosexual conduct, secular sex education, and a host of other evils. Otherwise we are apt to have "the protection of civil Government" removed from us. As the culture of the United States decays further, and intolerance of Catholic moral teaching increases, harassment of our universities, schools and parades increases. What are we to do? Before the Revolution the Carrolls had contemplated emigration to French Louisiana to escape the anti-Catholic laws of the English colonies. Where can we flee to, what community can we establish? But if our first love is the welfare and future glory of Christ's true Church, then the establishment of communities, even in the United States, can be a labor of that love, even if precarious political conditions threaten to make that labor of love lost. Anyway, we have no choice but to work and nourish the Mystical Body, as best we can, while leaving the outcome all to God.

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