2017

The Francophone World and the Making of an American Catholicism

Mitchell Edward Oxford

College of William and Mary, meoxford@email.wm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation


http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/S2KT0M

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
The Francophone World and the Making of an American Catholicism

Mitchell Edward Oxford
Orange Park, Florida

Master of Arts in History, The University of
South Carolina, Columbia, 2014
Bachelor of Arts, The Florida State
University, 2006

A Thesis Here presented to the Graduate Faculty of The College of William &
Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Lyon G. Tyler Department of History

College of William & Mary
August, 2017
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Mitchell Edward Oxford

Approved by the Committee, May, 2017

Committee Chair
Associate Professor Paul Mapp, History
College of William & Mary

Senior Lecturer Guillaume Aubert, History
College of William & Mary

Professor Joshua Piker, History
College of William & Mary
ABSTRACT

Although historians have long understood the importance of France to the institutional development of the Catholic Church in British North America, this portfolio is an attempt to demonstrate the significant role played by the Francophone world in shaping a distinctly American Catholicism in the United States. It does so by looking at two moments in the history of the American republic. The first is the attitude of the Continental Congress toward Quebec, which culminated in the invasion of Canada in 1775. In their attempt to sway Canada to the Patriot cause, Congress slowly reconciled themselves to guarantee religious liberty to the Roman Catholic Quebecois. Congress also included two Catholic Marylanders, John Carroll and Charles Carroll of Carrollton, in its Commission to Canada, which sought in vain to gain Quebecois’ support for the invasion. Although the Commission failed in its goals, it was nevertheless an important moment in trajectory of religious toleration in the emerging American republic and it opened opportunities for Roman Catholics such as the Carrolls to gain greater participation in civil government. The second paper adds to the scholarship on the significance of the French Revolution on American Catholicism. Whereas most of the literature on this topic focuses on the immigration of priests, women religious, and devout laypersons from France to the United States, this essay argues that the French Revolution was central to Bishop John Carroll’s evolving understanding of republicanism, secular government, church-state relations, and, crucially, his beliefs about the direction of providential history at the moment in which Carroll was organizing his see.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedications</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 1. Intellectual Biography</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 2. The Fall of the Old Regime in France and the Making of an American Catholicism</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 3. “This very important &amp; almost unbounded trust”: The Invasion of Quebec and the Making of an American Catholicism</strong></td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks Joshua Piker, whose guidance, thoughtful critiques and helpful suggestions throughout the research and writing of this portfolio was invaluable. He also wishes to express his gratitude to Guillaume Aubert, under whose guidance the first chapter of this portfolio was researched and written. Finally, the author is also deeply grateful to Paul Mapp for serving as the chair of his committee, and for his thorough comments on the portfolio.
This portfolio is dedicated to Ann Johnson, who taught me the genre of the scholarly essay.
Intellectual Biography

I came to the study of American Catholicism, and of religion more generally, through a side door. Having written my master’s thesis on a transnational, trans-Atlantic family, in later revisions I came to see that what tied this Franco-American family together, despite the trials of time and distance, was that they held to a shared Catholic faith. But as I turned to the study of religion for its analytical salience in my study of the Delage-Sumter family, I happily came to realize that my work had historiographical import as well. As I worked to turn my thesis into an article, I began to situate my research within recent literature examining the connections between French and American Catholics in the early American republic, and sought to bring that work more fully into conversation with the scholarship on French Revolutionary refugees more generally.

With this as my background, as a master’s student at William & Mary, I have pursued two projects that explore the international context in which a distinctly American Catholicism emerged. My first paper, “The Invasion of Canada and the Creation of an American Catholicism,” examines how the Continental Congress’s attempts to bring Quebec into the American Revolution offered opportunities for Roman Catholics in the thirteen colonies to participate in the politics of the emerging American republic. First examining the seeming paradox between Anglo-American anti-Catholic reactions to the Quebec Act with Congress’s repeated efforts to entice the Quebecois into the Revolution through promises of religious liberty, I argue that Congress slowly recognized that Roman
Catholicism could be reconciled with British constitutional government and individual liberty. I then look at the ill-fated invasion of Quebec, and the role played by two Roman Catholic Marylanders, Charles Carroll of Carrollton and his cousin John Carroll, in the "Commission to Canada." Even though the Commission was a failure, it remained significant, I argue, because in sending the Carrolls as its representatives, Congress set an important precedent for the American Republic.

In my second paper, I continue my study of the Carrolls role in early American Catholicism. In "The Fall of the French Old Regime and the Making of an American Catholicism," I examine the role of France in the career and thinking of John Carroll, who in 1790 became the first Roman Catholic bishop in the United States. I argue that Carroll's connection to France played a greater role in his thinking about religious toleration, Christian pluralism, and the separation of church and state than scholars have previously thought. Carroll’s revulsion toward the French Revolution, I claim, even in its early stages, put him ahead of his American contemporaries. In so doing, my study also attempts to push against scholars' tendency to treat the influence on American Catholicism of Old Regime and Revolutionary France separately. I claim instead that John Carroll's antipathy toward France both before and during its revolution helped him to establish a distinctly American Catholicism.

These research projects have provided me the opportunity to familiarize myself with the prodigious amount of extant primary material relating to the Carrolls. This year, my research largely relied on edited volumes of
correspondence for the Carrolls: *Dear Papa, Dear Charley*, and *The John Carroll Papers*. Indeed, for the context of a semester-long research project, these collections have proved a rich source base (and one that I will continue to use throughout my career). Beyond the Carrolls’ published papers, I have worked – albeit briefly – at the diocesan archives in Baltimore, which hold a trove of important collections for historians of early American Catholicism. Although the Carroll family is undeniably of crucial importance to my research, because my work attempts to place the experience of eighteenth-century Catholicism in Maryland within a larger Atlantic framework, I recognize my need to expand from this initial source base.

In addition to focusing my research, this portfolio has also deepened my understanding of the historiography of early American republic and colonial North America. While these essays show that this effort is haltingly slow (indeed, the subtitle of each paper shows that I continue to look forward to the “making of an American Catholicism” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries), they also shows my efforts to intervene in earlier historiographies of American religion.

As I prepare to move forward with this work, I intend to begin revisions of my essay on John Carroll and the French Revolution first. Because I expect that my dissertation will be trained on the role played by France in the development of American Catholicism in the early republic, I envision that the French Revolution will be a crucial pivot point in that story. Furthermore, thinking pragmatically, I am far more comfortable with the both the sources and historiography at play in
the 1790s than the 1760s and 1770s, and with writing on the French Revolution than the American Revolution. Moreover, the comprehensive exam field that I will read this summer is the French Atlantic with Guillaume Aubert. In reading for this field, which will have a concentration in religion, I will add to my capacity to intervene in the historiographies that I believe are relevant to this project: religion in the Atlantic World, the French and Haitian Revolutions, and religion in Quebec and Louisiana especially.

While I prepare for comprehensive examinations, I will also do two research trips this summer. The first trip will be a return to Baltimore to continue work on the correspondence found between John Carroll and his contacts in Europe that are not included in the edited volumes. The second, funded in part by a research grant from the College of Arts & Sciences, is to the archives at University of Notre Dame. Whereas the archives at Baltimore are indispensable for any researcher studying Catholicism in the early American republic (as Baltimore was the see of the first American diocese), Notre Dame’s holdings are rather more vast. Of particular importance at Notre Dame are the 152 microfilm records of the Propaganda Fide, the Vatican office that directed the Roman Catholic Church’s missionary activity from the seventeenth century forward. The agents of the Propaganda Fide played a pivotal role in the Catholic Church in North America from its earliest foundations, and into the early American Republic. I am eager to begin working in this collection, as it will play an important role in the revision process for both of the essays in my portfolio, and indeed, will be an important part of my anticipated dissertation research.
In reflecting on my research from this year, I feel that I have laid the groundwork for a dissertation on the role of France in the creation of an American Catholic Church. My hope is that such a study will be bookended with the end of the Seven Years’ War, and the fall of the Bourbon dynasty in 1830. The research presented in this portfolio are the first steps in examining important episodes in that story—and in working within the historiography of colonial British North America. In focusing these essays on the Carrolls, I have grounded my work on two of the central figures in the early American Catholicism. Moving forward, I’m looking forward to building on these projects and working within a growing body of scholarship on Catholicism in early America. Much work, of course remains to be done to recast these essays into dissertation chapters. The next steps, which I have here outlined, will allow me to bring to bear the French, Quebecois, and Vatican perspectives and actions to the story of early American Catholicism.
The Fall of the Old Regime in France and the Making of an American Catholicism

The church is likely to lose France . . . the enemies of religion there have had the art to connect pretended political liberty with the subversion of the Catholic faith; and thus the giddy multitude are deluded.

John Carroll to Charles Plowden, October 12, 1791

1789 was a fateful year for both France and the United States. In France that summer, the political and economic tensions that had been mounting throughout the 1780s boiled over into revolution. Events in the United States were no less significant. The United States Constitution came into force in March, George Washington was inaugurated as president in April, and in November, Pope Pius VI appointed John Carroll of Maryland to become bishop of Baltimore, thereby establishing the first Roman Catholic diocese in the United States. The following year, Carroll wrote to Washington on behalf of the “Roman Catholics in America.” Washington’s presidency was “peculiarly pleasing to us,” Carroll expounded, for “whilst our country preserves her freedom and independence, we shall have a well founded title to claim from her justice, the equal rights of citizenship, as the price of our blood spilt under your eyes.” But although Carroll’s message looked back to the shared experience of the American Revolution, his appreciation of the liberties enjoyed by American Catholics was shaped as much

---

by his education and early career in France, and was informed by his observation of the French Revolution, as it was by the American War of Independence.\textsuperscript{2}

France was the dominant Catholic power in the late eighteenth-century Atlantic world, and John Carroll’s education and early career in Old Regime France bears witness to its importance to American Catholicism. Educated at the English Jesuit College of St. Omer in French Flanders from 1748 to 1753, and spending nearly two decades as a pupil, novitiate, and teacher in France and Belgium, Carroll had greater familiarity with France than more celebrated American Francophiles. This acquaintance, however, fostered in Carroll a contempt for the French state and its monarch, Louis XV, who in the 1760s spearheaded the suppression of the Society of Jesus, the order to which Carroll had devoted his life. Carroll returned to Maryland in 1773, but remained – not surprisingly – a close observer of French politics. As the revolution in France unfolded, Carroll watched with increasing concern as even in its early, supposedly moderate, stage the revolution radically reshaped, and even persecuted the Catholic Church in France. The bitterness of the suppression of

the Jesuits ensured that even as Carroll lamented the ruin of church in France, the anticlericalism of the revolution seemed only to confirm his judgement about the decay of France’s moral and political order.

Accordingly, although he was no apologist for the ancien regime, Carroll quickly rejected French Revolutionary anti-Catholicism. This put Carroll far out in front of most American criticism of the revolution in France, which only slowly appeared as the revolution radicalized (and indeed, as émigrés from both the French and Haitian revolutions began to interfere in American politics) in the mid-1790s. However, as his letter to Washington displays, Carroll’s revulsion with the revolution in France did not amount to a simple abnegation of revolution or republicanism. Instead, upon his return to America, Carroll’s disgust with the French role in the Jesuit suppression contributed to his emergence as a champion of the non-interference of the state in matters of religion. Carroll likewise became an enthusiastic supporter of Christian pluralism; toleration among Christians, he was convinced, would only lead to greater civil rights for American Catholics and almost inevitably grow the Catholic Church in the United States. And thus, as he embraced the canonically American values of Christian pluralism and the separation of church and state, Carroll repeatedly contrasted these protections offered to Catholics in the United States with the deleterious effects of French tyranny (be it monarchical or democratic) on the church in France.3

---

Scholars of course appreciate the irony that his “Most Christian Majesty,” the king of France, decisively intervened in the American Revolution to aid the overwhelmingly Protestant American Patriots at the expense of France’s imperial foe. Historians have also long recognized the significance of the French Revolution to American Catholicism, for the immigration of French priests, women religious, and devout laypersons to the United States that it spurred. Carroll himself judged that the arrival of these émigrés – many of whom were to play distinguished roles as educators, missionaries, and clerics in the United States – as nothing short of an act of Providence. Their arrival was confirmation, Carroll believed, that the American church was to be the chief beneficiary of the French Revolution. The radical disjuncture of the French Revolution has obscured scholars’ views of the continuity of France’s importance to American Catholicism. However, in examining John Carroll’s career and thought, the centrality of France to the development of a distinctly American Catholicism in the early republican United States comes fully into view.4

---

The American Revolution opened up opportunities for Catholics in the new nation. In 1783, Carroll boasted confidently to his lifelong friend and fellow alumnus of St. Omer, the English former Jesuit Charles Plowden, of the “Universal toleration throughout this immense country.” Carroll was quick to acknowledge, however, that this toleration was something short of full acceptance. “The full participation of all civil rights is not granted to [Catholics],” he admitted in the same letter. Days later Carroll wrote to the Propaganda Fide, the Roman curia’s office in charge of missions of the church. He praised his state native Maryland (as well as Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Virginia) for extending full political rights “without distinction or diminution” to all professing Christians. “This is a blessing and advantage,” he explained to Rome, and that advantage, he advised carried with it a “duty to preserve & improve . . . by demeaning ourselves on all occasions as subjects zealously attached to our government & avoiding to give any jealousies on account of any dependence of foreign jurisdictions.” Citing a common critique launched against American Catholics, Carroll wrote Plowden that “even the Spiritual supremacy of the Pope” was cause for suspicion. “A foreign temporal jurisdiction,” he continued, “will never be

tolerated here.” Independence had severed Catholics in the former colonies
subordination to the apostolic prefect in London. But Carroll’s warnings to
Plowden and Propaganda Fide were aimed to ward off any possibility that Rome
would impose in its place the episcopal authority of another outside power:
America’s Catholic ally, France.⁵

Carroll had reason to fear the possibility of the imposition of French
ecclesiastical oversight over the American Catholic Church. And his concern was
not simply over how it would be viewed by his fellow Americans, rather, it
reflected Carroll’s dim view of Gallicanism – the constitutional arrangement of
church-state relations in France in which the crown had prerogative over
ecclesiastic appointments – which made him suspect of French influence on the
American church. After he had completed his education at St. Omer, Carroll
taught at Jesuit schools in France and Belgium for nearly two decades, during
which time he was ordained into the priesthood. In 1762, at which time Carroll
was serving as a professor at St. Omer, King Louis XV of France led the effort to
suppress the Jesuits in his realm. St. Omer was closed, and Carroll and his
brethren were forced to flee to Belgium. After the suppression of the Jesuit order
in France, Carroll entered into a life of forced peripateticism. In the following
decade, he taught briefly in Liége, Bruges, and Ghent in Belgium before making

⁵ John Carroll to Charles Plowden, September 26, 1783. In JCP vol. 1, 78-79; John Carroll to
Vitaliano Borromeo, November 10, 1783. In JCP, I, 80-81.
a brief and futile journey to Rome in 1772 in the naïve hope that he might affect
the outcome of the contest for the future of the Jesuits.⁶

Little of Carroll’s own writing survives from this period. However, a letter
from Carroll’s uncle, Charles Carroll of Annapolis, to his son, the future signer of
the Declaration of Independence Charles Carroll of Carrollton, articulates a
disdain for the French monarchy that John Carroll certainly shared. “I am the
more astonished that the King of France has abandoned the Jesuits,” the elder
Charles Carroll wrote, “I cannot see . . . [it] as anything but gross, barefaced
Calumny unsupported by facts of reason. Inscrutable are the ways of God.”
Worse yet for Carroll, Pope Clement XIV suppressed the whole of the Jesuit
order in 1773. Upon learning of the suppression, Carroll wrote his mother,
Eleanor Darnall Carroll, that the “greatest blessing which in my estimation I could
receive from God, would be immediate death.” Shortly afterward, he made hasty
arrangements to return to the United States and his native Maryland. On his
return to his family’s home, Carroll was, quite understandably, “totally distraught”
that the society to which he had devoted his life now no longer existed.⁷

---

⁶ There is some dispute over the date of Carroll’s ordination. Guilday (1922) claims that it was in
1769, however Melville (1955) is less certain, arguing that it could have been as early as 1759.
See also, Melville John Carroll, 54-70; Dale Van Kley, The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the
⁷ Charles Carroll of Annapolis to Charles Carroll of Carrollton, n.d. [1763]. In Ronald Hoffman ed.,
Dear Papa, dear Charley: the peregrinations of a revolutionary aristocrat, as told by Charles
Carroll of Carrollton and his father, Charles Carroll of Annapolis, with sundry observations on
bastardy, child-rearing, romance, matrimony, commerce, tobacco, slavery, and the politics of
revolutionary America, 3 vols. (Chapel Hill, 2001), I, 330, 267; John Carroll to Eleanor Darnall
Carroll in JCC, I, 32; Ferrelly, Papist Patriots, 248.
Fortuitously, Carroll arrived in Maryland just as the American Revolution was beginning. He threw himself into the patriot cause, seeing in the revolution the possibility for the disestablishment of state churches following American independence, and the removal of restrictions placed on the civil rights of Catholics. Moreover, having only just experienced the trauma of the suppression of the Jesuits and the American Revolution also seemed to promise the possibility of independence from the Roman administrators in the Propaganda Fide suspicious of the intentions of ex-Jesuits of which there were many in British North America. As he worked successfully to draw American Catholics to the patriot cause, Carroll emerged as the undisputed, albeit unofficial, leader of the Catholic Church in the newly independent United States. But American Catholics now lacked episcopal oversight; there was no mechanism for maintaining discipline among the clergy and laity, plan for the expansion of the church, or educate and ordain new priests. If America won its independence, Carroll was certain this would require Rome to elevate the Catholic Church of the new nation the status of a diocese, and he and the American clergy would no longer be subject to Propaganda Fide. Carroll immediately began to advocate that the now-independent United States needed a national bishop. But if the American Catholic Church was to establish its own episcopacy, Carroll would have to convince Propaganda Fide of its absolute necessity.\(^8\)

Carroll’s 1783 letter to the Propaganda Fide, written shortly after the Treaty of Paris had secured American independence, began this effort. “Our

\(^8\) See also Farrelly, \textit{Papist Patriots}, 219-57; Melville \textit{John Carroll}, 38-53.
Religious system has undergone a revolution, if possible, more extraordinary than our political one,” he proclaimed. He reiterated the point to the Papal Nuncio in Paris, Vitaliano Borromeo the following year. “The revolution from which we have just emerged,” he informed Borromeo, “has procured this advantage of toleration and of admission to civil functions.” But as he had explained previously to the Propaganda Fide, Carroll stressed the tenuousness of the situation. “Some in the United States, Carroll warned, “[believed] subjection to His Holiness incompatible with the independence of a sovereign state.” Thus, counselled Carroll, although “[Catholics] are tolerated everywhere . . . it is only in Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia that they enjoy advantages common to those other citizens.” Carroll was careful to speak only of the “quite false” idea of Catholic political subservience to the Pope, but in his advising for “extreme circumspection . . . in order not to give pretexts to the enemies of Religion to deprive us our actual rights,” his aim was clearly to disentangle his church from interference from any foreign temporal power.9

Carroll’s letter to Plowden stated his concerns more plainly. “A foreign temporal jurisdiction will never be tolerated here,” he asserted. “Even the Spiritual supremacy of the Pope is the only reason why in some of the United States, the full participation of all civil rights is not granted to the R.C.” In another letter to Plowden, from 1784, Carroll made his point finer still: “no authority derived from the [Propaganda Fide] will ever be admitted here . . . the only

---

connexion [our church] ought to have with Rome is to acknowledge the pope as the [spiritual] head.” Plowden, for his part, fanned the flames of disquiet over question of French control of the American church. Writing to Carroll in late 1783, he worried that “the policy of the French ministry . . . by bringing forth a Frenchman, or perhaps an Irish Frenchman, would use religion as an instrument to increase their own influence in America.” Carroll flatly denied that this was the case, replying harshly: “You have adopted the language of some of the prints on your side the water by representing us as under imperious leaders, & the trammels of France: but alas! our Imperious leaders, by whom I suppose you mean the Congress, were at all times amenable to our particular assemblies. . . . And as to the trammels of France, certainly have never wore her chains, but have treated with her as equals.”

Nevertheless, Carroll conceded the necessity of French involvement the Roman curia’s evaluation of the future of the Catholic Church in the newly independent United States. “Endeavour to have you aided in this application,” he wrote to the Papal Nuncio to France, Borromeo, on the question of jurisdiction over the American church, “by a recommendation if possible from our own country and the Minister of France.” Such negotiations did take place between Borromeo, the Charles Gravier, Count de Vergennes, the Foreign Minister under Louis XVI, and the American emissary to France, Benjamin Franklin, on the feasibility of French superintendence over the American Catholic Church.

---

10 John Carroll to Charles Plowden, September 26, 1783. In JCP, I, 78-79; John Carroll to Charles Plowden, April 10, 1784 in JCP, I, 146; Charles Plowden to John Carroll, September 2, 1783 in Melville, John Carroll, 65.
Although much has been made of these discussions, the fear over the appointment of a French bishop to an American see was mostly driven by Francophobic speculation. Indeed, Vergennes flatly denied a French prerogative, writing to Franklin “there should not be in America a French church.” Moreover, when the French minister to Philadelphia solicited Congress for its opinion on the matter, he was informed of the American government’s official policy of indifference—the United States, it was made clear, would not involve itself in matters of the church along a European model. France’s minister to the United States, Anne César de la Luzerne, reported to his superiors in Paris that Congress had “declared itself incompetent to act in ecclesiastical affairs,” and that it was “a matter that concerns Catholics alone . . . providing that the prelate [to be appointed] avoided to assume any temporal authority.” Convinced that the American government had no interest in determining church governance along Gallican lines, Rome acceded to Carroll’s nomination to the position of Apostolic Prefect of the Catholic Church in the United States in July 1784. ”

***

11 John Carroll to Charles Plowden, September 26, 1783. In JCP, I, 78-79; John Carroll to Charles Plowden, April 10, 1784 in JCP, I, 146; Charles Plowden to John Carroll, September 2, 1783 in Melville, John Carroll, 65.
The Catholic Church in the United States now had Carroll as its head. But Carroll understood that his authority as Apostolic Prefect was insufficient to the task of organizing the church, and establishing the institutions necessary for its future. The church faced monumental challenges along several fronts, and as prefect Carroll was still subject to the Propaganda Fide and could not effectively discipline insubordinate clergymen, among whom included several notorious peripatetic Europeans. Moreover, only a bishop could ordain new priests. The immense geography of the United States exacerbated his dire need for able clergymen to minister to the nearly 25,000 Catholics spread from the Mississippi to the Atlantic. In 1785, Carroll informed Propaganda Fide that there were 15,800 Catholics (including the enslaved) in Maryland, for which there were only nineteen priests; Pennsylvania, which had 9,000 Catholics “and very few Africans” there were a mere five priests, of which three were over seventy years old.  

The vast majority of Catholics lived in Maryland and Pennsylvania, and this population was comparably well served by the clergy. “The Catholics in the Jersies, N.Y., the great Western Country, . . . (to say nothing of many in the N. England States & Carolinas),” he wrote Plowden in 1783, “are entirely destitute of spiritual succours.” The geographical immensity of the United States further required Carroll to suffer the adventurers who inevitably caused him problems. Furthermore, the time and distance needed to communicate with Propaganda

---

12 Carroll’s letter to the Propaganda Fide in 1785 reports the figures and estimations listed here. See John Carroll to Leonardo Antonelli, March 1, 1785. In JCP, I, 179-85, quotes from 179, 181.
contribute to the weakness of Carroll’s authority. “Our distance [to Rome], tho not so great,” Carroll explained in a 1790 letter to Plowden, “in a political light is much greater.” As the United States – unlike the New World colonies of Catholic powers – lacked “intermediate connexion with Rome,” Carroll argued an American church without the authority of a national bishop of its own was at risk of “separation from the centre of unity.”

The challenges facing the Catholic Church in the nascent United States convinced Carroll that it needed the authority and self-determination that would come from the American Church’s elevation to the status of diocese. In addition to a hoped-for devolution of church governance away from the interference of Propaganda Fide, the American church also sorely lacked the educational establishments necessary train clergy to serve its widely dispersed laity. Writing to Plowden in 1787, Carroll laid forth his “two great undertakings”: the establishment of a school “for the education of youth,” and “solicit[ing] the appointment of a diocesan Bishop,” which were inexorably intertwined. “The latter is a necessary consequence of the former,” he explained to Plowden, “the establishment of an academy, is to form subjects capable of becoming useful members of the ministry; and for these a Bishop, for Ordination, will be indispensably necessary.” Indeed, wrote Carroll, still bearing the mark of an educationally minded Jesuit, his proposed seminary was “the object nearest my heart.” The creation of a seminary to train American clergymen was in the service of Carroll’s ardent desire that Catholics in the United States “lay aside national

distinctions & and attachments & strive to form not Irish, or English, or French congregations . . . but Catholic-American Congregations.” Carroll was certain that the American church needed the authority of a national bishop for these ambitions to come to fruition.  

“We conceive our situation no longer as that of missioners,” Carroll declared to John Thorpe in 1785. A former Jesuit now residing in Rome, Thorpe had participated in discussions over Carroll’s nomination as Apostolic Prefect. Only a few years later, Carroll appealed to Rome that the United States ought to be served by a national bishop. In a letter to Cardinal Leonardo Antonelli, the Prefect of the Propaganda Fide in March 1788, signed by Carroll, undersigned by priests from New York and Boston, and “in the name of all of our co-laborers,” Carroll told Rome that “the time has come” for the elevation of a bishop. “The very title and dignity” of bishop, he argued, “may be effective in coercing those of intractable disposition.” Moreover, while bishops were “once abhorred in . . . America,” he cited the installation of bishops in the Episcopal Church as proof that such prejudices were no longer as prevalent. Carroll also asked for an extraordinary concession: in order to “arouse the least suspicion and opposition among those with whom we live,” Rome should grant the American clergy the right to recommend their own candidate—only in this first instance, of course. The Holy See granted the American clergy this right in early 1789, and Carroll’s

election was little in doubt. His peers elected him 24 to 1 in a secret ballot, and Rome quickly certified their selection.\(^{15}\)

***

Then as now, the ritual of episcopal consecration was no trivial matter. Roman hierarchy depends upon the theory of direct historical apostolic succession traced back to Jesus and his apostles, and the bishop-elect is elevated to his position by the laying on of hands of other bishops. As Carroll was to be the first bishop in the United States, one thing was certain: in order to be consecrated he would have to leave the country. Several potential locations emerged: Quebec, the see of the only other bishop in North America; Ireland, the Carrolls’ ancestral home; England, where he had many friends, including Plowden; and France, where he was educated and had worked for nearly two decades. Quebec was quickly ruled out, as Carroll was determined to travel to Europe. Though he received generous invitations from English, Irish, and French prelates, Carroll selected England as the site of the ceremony. Writing to John Troy, the archbishop of Dublin, Carroll explained why England was his choice. This decision, Carroll explained, was due to a longstanding invitation from Thomas Weld, “a most respectable Catholic gentleman of England,” and out of

hope that “my going to England may be attended with some advantages to the cause of religion within my extensive diocese.”

It was understandable for Carroll to choose England as the site of his consecration. However, Carroll nevertheless claimed in a letter to the Papal Nuncio in Paris, Antoine Dugnani, which he wrote upon his arrival in England in late summer 1790 that “from the moment there was any question of naming me to the episcopacy, I proposed to go to France to receive consecration . . . from the hands of Your Excellency.” Carroll explained that he did not follow through with his expressed intention (polite fiction though it likely was) because “some months before my departure from America, the troubles of France were described to us as so frightful that I believed Your Excellency would no longer be there.” He repeated this justification in a letter to another Frenchman, Jacques-André Emery, the Superior General of the Society of Saint-Sulpice. The Sulpicians were a French teaching order that operated the celebrated Seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris, several minor seminaries across France, and a seminary in Montreal established in the mid seventeenth century. Carroll’s replies to Dugnani and Emery demonstrated his awareness of the danger that the French Revolution posed to the church, even as it offered him pretext to decline their invitation.

---

Having declined all other invitations, Carroll’s consecration took place at Weld’s private chapel in Lullworth, England. Bishop Charles Walmesley, the Vicar Apostolic of the Western District of England, administered the sacrament, and Carroll’s dear friend Charles Plowden delivered the homily at the ceremony. Plowden’s oration was a short but sweeping engagement with the history of Catholicism in North America that framed America’s War of Independence as a moment of providential history. “Almighty has dismembered the great British empire, and has called forth into existence a new empire in the Western world,” he declared. “The propagation of catholic religion, which, heretofore fettered by restraining laws, is now enlarged from bondage.” In the preface to the printed address, Plowden likewise praised American religious freedom, declaring that the “penal laws [against Catholicism] are no longer known . . . the very term *toleration* is exploded: because it imparts power in one predominant sect, to indulge that religious liberty to others, which all claim as an inherent right.” Acclaiming American liberties in harmony with Carroll’s own thinking, Plowden contrasted the United States with a British system that would not reform its anti-Catholic laws until 1829. Plowden’s homily also commended the bright future of American Catholicism in a manner the Propaganda Fide would understand well. The United States in its “state of religious freedom,” Plowden proclaimed, “[gave] stability and dignity to the Catholic religion.” Accordingly, “Catholic clergymen, of
various orders and nations resorted to America, and they everywhere find an ample vineyard to cultivate.”

Plowden thus painted a rosier picture of the American church than the ever-restrained John Carroll allowed. Carroll was always quick to point out that Catholics, thought tolerated, “were not eligible to the first offices of government” in many states. “This unjust exclusion has always hurt my feelings,” he had written to Plowden not long after his election as bishop. But the confidence that Plowden expressed for the future of American Catholicism was not simply platitudes on behalf of his friend. Rather, it was a critique of the treatment of Catholics in his own country, and indeed, by the menace to the church posed by the French Revolution. Carroll too was quite willing to contrast the “cruel bondage” of Catholics in Britain with the “justice and political advantages of . . . not only free toleration, but of extending equal rights” to Catholics in the United States. “The daily advantages arising to America from this policy,” he wrote to his English friend Robert Petre, “should be a lesson to Britain.” But although Carroll and Plowden were quick to critique the limited freedoms for Catholics in Britain, his choice to be consecrated in England – albeit in a private chapel – and not in Paris, points to Carroll’s consternation over the events then taking place in his former home.


In the summer of 1789, while Carroll was awaiting the confirmation from Rome of his election as bishop by his American fellow priests, revolution erupted in France. The newly formed National Assembly in Paris quickly annulled the Catholic Church’s privileges and cut the church off from its financial support. In June 1789, it abolished the obligatory tithes, and in November, it seized the church’s immensely valuable lands in order to back the new French currency. The Assembly also moved to reorganize the church. It forbade most ecclesiastical orders, and it restructured the dioceses to match the newly rationalized civil jurisdictions. Finally, on November 27, 1790, the Assembly passed the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which required French priests to “take a solemn oath . . . to be faithful to the nation, to the law, and to the King, and to maintain with all his power the Constitution decreed by the National Assembly and accepted by the King.” The oath was untenable to the French hierarchy and to great numbers of its clergy, who could not countenance a sworn acknowledgment that they owed the state and the nation a higher allegiance than the Catholic Church and the Supreme Pontiff. The Civil Constitution was, therefore, an early turning point in the French Revolution. Much of the French clergy – including Emery and many of the Sulpician priests under his supervision – soon began to look for avenues through which they might weather this trial in exile.20

---

Because Carroll declined to visit France in 1790, his understanding of the revolution was mediated through what news he could glean from newspapers and correspondence. “The assemblée nationale have not yet authority enough to restrain the rabble from outrage,” Plowden wrote him in early 1790, “they do nothing but destroy; the church is their chief victim.” As Carroll absorbed reports about the revolution’s course, his interpretation of these events were a reflection of his unfavorable assessment of France’s moral fiber. In October 1789, Carroll wrote to Plowden “in the midst of convulsions in France, I have been solicitous to hear, how Religion would be treated there. Your last justifies my fears.” Although Carroll viewed the revolutionaries’ attacks on the church in France with horror, he saw it as a regrettable consequence of the decline of religious fervor in that country. “I have long thought that almost every man in that kingdom,” he wrote, “are lost to every feeling of Religion.” Carroll justified this assessment by citing his experiences with French immigrants and travelers in the United States, who were, he claimed, “every where a scandal to Religion with very few exceptions.” “they disseminate,” he continued, “all the principles of irreligion, [and] contempt for the church.” This negativity, of course, had predated the Revolution.”

Carroll’s low estimation of French religious life was a clear reflection of the trauma he had experienced by the suppression of the Jesuits – a connection he made explicit in a letter to Plowden in March 1790. “I cannot help thinking,” he

---

remarked to the fellow ex-Jesuit, “that the late convulsions in Europe, when traced to their real sources, must discover to every thinking mind the necessity of a virtuous education, & of encouraging men capable of conducting the rising generation thro all the degrees of moral, religious & literary improvement.” Thus, in Carroll’s estimation, moral failings and a lack of proper education, and he saw no way to rebut this failure than through his own suppressed order. “On whom then can the governing powers turn their eyes,” he wondered, “but on those, who are trained under the discipline of the Society.” But Carroll had little hope for the restoration of the society, which he judged as having “very shallow support indeed” in Europe.22

The French Revolution likewise bolstered Carroll’s opposition to state involvement in matters of religion. Louis XV’s role in the suppression of the Jesuits had framed his early career and his thinking about church and state—now the French Revolutionary government’s intrusion into the church in France pushed Carroll to lionize further the American system. Indeed, upon his return to Maryland Carroll had emerged as a forthright advocate of the separation of church and state, he regularly and effusively praised as a bulwark of protection for Catholics in the American republic, and as salutary virtues for society as a whole. In 1783, Carroll decried governments that “rendered its subjects precarious by obliging many to render to the state . . . all laws sacred & civil.” He was equally vociferous in his praise of Christian pluralism, which he asserted likewise afforded American Catholics in the early republican United States.

22 John Carroll to Charles Plowden, March 16, 1790. In JCP, I, 433-34
Responding to “inflammatory comments” in *The Colombian Magazine* in 1787, Carroll wrote the publication that Americans’ “freedom and independence, acquired by the united efforts, and cemented with the mingled blood of protestant and catholic fellow-citizens, should be equally enjoyed by all.”

In 1785, Carroll had preached a widely circulated sermon exhorting Catholics to extend “earnest supplications . . . that every blessing, temporal & eternal may descend on your fellow Citizens.” Reminding his flock that the United States was “now become our own & taking us into her protection,” he encouraged them to “extend, by your example . . . the prevalence of Christian virtue.” This was nothing less than a call for a Catholic patriotism based on Christian pluralism. Revolutionary France’s aggression toward the church only deepened Carroll’s attachment to an American government disinterested in religious matters, and an American public that “detested all species of discord . . . because of differences of religion.”

The attacks on the Catholic Church in France seemed to confirm Carroll’s suspicions about the inherent dangers of Gallican acquiescence of the church to the state, and the decay of France’s moral order. However, soon after Carroll arrived in England for his consecration in July of 1790, the opportunities that the French Revolution would open for the Catholic Church in the United States

---


began to be revealed. The letters from Dugnani, the Papal Nuncio in Paris, and
Emery, the Sulpician Superior General, inviting Carroll to France (which
unfortunately have not survived) proposed much more than simply the honor of
consecrating the American on French soil. They offered a proposition that would
have been implausible before the French Revolution: the Society of Saint Sulpice
wished to send several of its priests to establish a seminary in the United
States.\textsuperscript{25}

Carroll recognized the Sulpicians’ scheme “was a great & auspicious
event for our new Diocese.” Writing to Antonelli after receiving Emery’s letter,
Carroll expressed it to be “one of the great strokes of providence” in favor of
American Catholicism. Nevertheless nearly declined it. Carroll feared that the
United States “was not ripe for a seminary.” Indeed, he observed, it would take
many years until there were American scholars well enough educated “to profit
from this generous offer.” In his gracious reply to Emery’s invitation, Carroll
voiced these concerns. “We have no seminary,” he began bluntly. “I have been
applying myself to the founding of an establishment for the education of the
Catholic Youth . . . [with] the intention of training students for an ecclesiastical
seminary.” Carroll was of course enthusiastic about the offer. “I will consider
myself very happy,” he wrote Emery, that “if, having considered the state of our
present situation you judge that these gentlemen could contribute to the goal
which they have in mind.” Matter-of-factly, Carroll assessed that “the experience
and zeal of the gentlemen from St. Sulpice would be of greatest use.” But

\textsuperscript{25} See the scholarship on the Sulpicians in the United States in footnotes 4 and 17.
Carroll’s honest assessment of the state of American Catholic education, and his hopes for the feasibility of the proposed Sulpician seminary demonstrated his caution, but also the scars of past experiences with foreign priests that promised much, but contributed little but partisanship and schism to his church.26

As Carroll worked to erect an academy for American Catholic youths, his ecumenist enthusiasm extended to education. “Colleges [which] are now erecting for giving general and liberal education,” he had written Plowden in 1787, “both to Masters and Scholars of every denomination.” He later reported on a proposed college in Annapolis, Maryland. This school, Carroll wrote admiringly, was “erected on principles of perfect equality, as to Religion.” Carroll even served on its board. “I see at present no other advantage to us Catholics,” Carroll opined, “for our young lads . . . to pursue their higher studies of law, medicine &c.” However, he quickly pointed out that this secular academy would, “in other respects . . . be hurtful to our Institution.” Although Carroll preferred that American Catholics be educated in secular, and even non-Catholic sectarian institutions in the United States over foreign schools, he continued toward the realization of his desired diocesan academy to prepare students for advanced theological study at an American seminary. These institutions would be “our main sheet anchor for Religion,” he wrote Plowden in 1789.27


That same year, Carroll’s academy was established. Situated on a small plot of land overlooking the Potomac River, Georgetown College became the oldest institution of Catholic higher education. Although Carroll celebrated this achievement, the American church was ever lacking in priests, and could not spare its best-trained and most well educated brethren to teach at Georgetown. Because of this, the hoped for seminary remained far from being brought to fruition. The American church did not lack the funding for to take on Carroll’s project. Maryland’s former Jesuits still held substantial lands (including several plantations) and Carroll was assiduous in soliciting further donations from foreign benefactors. What Carroll truly lacked, however, were masters and a superintendent for his academy who could properly prepare students “destined to serve in the clerical militia” for seminary. Carroll wrote of this problem often, even encouraging Plowden to think of “what a blessing to the country” he would be; “what reputation and solid advantage would accrue to the academy from such a Director!”

Although Carroll acknowledged Plowden was not likely to leave England, he solicited him to help a find superintendent who would “carry considerable

---

weight of authority,” have “considerable knowledge of the world,” and be able to “adopt only as much [from his past experience] as is suited to the circumstances of this country.” “You see I require a good deal,” he deadpanned. But these high standards were necessary, he assured Plowden, “to give reputation & permanancy” to the planned academy, given the efforts recently made by the American schools with which Carroll’s academy would have to compete for students. Upon receiving the Sulpicians’ offer, Carroll of course recognized its heretofore unthinkably propitious potential. But “with what will these gentlemen be able to occupy themselves?” Carroll wondered, in the years before suitable candidates were ready to begin at the proposed Sulpician seminary.29

Carroll may have expected his cautious reply would end discussions with the Sulpicians. But if that was so, he was pleasantly surprised at how intent the leadership of the Society of Saint Sulpice was to establish a seminary in the United States. After Emery received Carroll’s response, he commissioned François-Charles Nagot, the director of the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice in Paris to travel to London and discuss the matter further. In his reply to Emery, Carroll had suggested that the Sulpicians might minister to the Francophone communities of the vast trans-Appalachian territory formerly attached to the Diocese of Quebec, as “something which would perhaps interest them while waiting for the formation of the Seminary.” But in sending Nagot, Emery made clear that his sole aim was to form an American seminary – not to send a band of missioners. The

---
29 John Carroll to Charles Plowden, October 23, 1789. In JCP, I, 389-90; John Carroll to James Emery, [September 3, 1790]. In JCP, I, 457
Sulpicians were first and foremost a teaching order, which, Carroll observed, was “now made useless by the revolution in their own Country.” Moreover, Carroll confided to Plowden, Antonelli himself now urged him “to seek out Sulpicians to bring to America” if only to “remove all suspicion that [Carroll was] about to restore the Society of Jesus.”

Carroll and Nagot met in early September 1790. Despite Carroll’s initial misgivings about the venture, they quickly came to an agreement that the Sulpicians would send “two or three Gentlemen selected by Monsr. Emery . . . next spring.” Moreover, Carroll reported, the Sulpicians offered their labors without pay, the society would fund their travel to the United States, and it would provide money enough for the refugee priests to purchase a building from which to operate the seminary. In response to Carroll’s admission that the United States presently lacked students prepared to enter ecclesiastical training, Nagot had assured the bishop that the Sulpicians would also “bring three or four Seminarians with them who either are English or know it . . . amply provided with books.” Writing to Antonelli at the end of September 1790, Carroll looked forward to the “great fruit to religion” that, he anticipated, would come from the Sulpician seminary. “It is the supreme indication of the most gracious will of God . . . that He has aroused excellent priests to come to our aid,” Carroll exalted, “especially when the new episcopate . . . will be most eager to have their assistance.” His report to Propaganda Fide was appropriately gracious, but Carroll’s unwillingness

---

to address the revolutionary context of the Sulpician’s immigration with Antonelli is conspicuous.31

At the end of September 1790, after several months in England, Carroll prepared to return to the United States. As he did, he received a long list of questions from Nagot, to which he responded carefully in the margins. Nagot inquired about the cost of living in Baltimore; the facility in finding appropriate housing; whether they should bring their own furnishing; should they attempt to purchase land to sustain themselves; and what the climate was in Baltimore. In addition to these more quotidian questions, Nagot also asked Carroll if it “would be necessary to obtain the consent of Congress [for their immigration] and would consent be readily granted?” “Consent of Congress unnecessary,” Carroll noted briskly, “Naturalization Act” referring to act of Congress passed in March of 1790 that restricted naturalization to “white person[s] . . . of good character,” but made no concrete provision for the process of immigration, which was left for individual states and ports to determine. Not long after responding to Nagot, Carroll prudently cautioned Plowden not to “let it reach France that the Gentlemen of St. Sulpice intend so many things for Religion. They may be bereft of the means by the gripping hand of irreligious despotism.” Emery and Nagot, Carroll knew well, were both vociferous opponents of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. The longer

---

the Sulpicians remained in France, the greater their risk of anticlerical retaliation when they did seek to emigrate.\textsuperscript{32}

Carroll arrived in Baltimore in early December, 1790. Invested now with the authority to impose discipline among his clergy, and with the promise that the Sulpicians would arrive in the coming year, Carroll could now take on the enormous task of organizing the American church. On December 12, Carroll preached his first sermon as bishop in his Baltimore pro-cathedral. Committing himself to “establish[ing] Ecclesiastical discipline, [and devising] a means for the religious education of Catholic youth . . . to educate & provide establishment for training up ministers.” Carroll aimed for the American church to “no longer depend on foreign & uncertain coadjutors [and] not to leave unassisted any of the faithful who are scattered thro this immense continent.” Moreover, Carroll rearticulated his previous calls to “preserve . . . a warm charity & forbearance towards every other denomination of Christians.” He cautioned, however, that this spirit of generosity ought not to be confused with the “fatal & prevailing indifference, which views all religions as equally acceptable toward God and Salutatory to men.” Carroll’s sermon set forth an ambitious agenda for his diocese. The church’s newfound capacity to work toward these lofty aims, he acknowledged in a letter to Henry Arundell, an English fellow St. Omer alumnus, was due to “the distressed state of Religion in France.” A sorrowful Carroll

nevertheless “[could not] but thank divine providence for opening on us such a prospect” as the Sulpicians imminent immigration to the United States.33

***

As he awaited the arrival of the Sulpicians, whom he expected by summer 1791, Carroll energetically took on the work he laid out in his inaugural sermon. He wrote furiously to churches throughout his diocese. He attempted to mollify internal disputes in Boston and Philadelphia; to set forth proper direction of the small parish in Charleston; and to establish contact with scattered and poorly served Francophone communities across the Appalachians. Furthermore, in early 1790 Carroll broke ground and drafted the constitution of Georgetown College. Of Georgetown, Carroll wrote Antonelli the following year, he had “reason to hope” he assured the cardinal, “[it] will prove a fruitful nursery of students for the seminary, and eventually of outstanding ministers of the altar.” But the centerpiece of Carroll’s organizational efforts was to convene a diocesan synod to establish uniform practice and discipline for Catholics throughout the United States.34

The contrast between the encouraging prospects for the growth of the American church under Carroll’s administration and the distressed and persecuted church in France could not have been more stark. Plowden wrote to Carroll as frequently as ever, offering the American bishop what insights he could

33 John Carroll, Sermon on Occasion of Possessing His Pro-Cathedral (Baltimore, 1790); John Carroll to Henry Arundell, Oct 4, 1790. In JCP, I, 474.

about the revolution in France. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy, and the virulent anticlericalism toward those who refused to take it, remained of paramount importance to both Carroll and Plowden. Before Carroll’s consecration as bishop, Plowden had written him “the college & our clergy in general [in England] are deeply interested in the new spirit of compliance wh. prevails at Rome.” The English Catholic community, Plowden suggested, was fearful that the papacy would fail to condemn the Civil Constitution, and “thus give jurisdiction & amiss to the strongest abettor[s] of the new oath.” Although Pius VI did not condemn the Civil Constitution until March of 1791, in January of that year Plowden was delighted to inform Carroll that he had received from France “long & edifying relations of the heads of the bishops & officiating clergy in refusing their civic oath. They are almost unanimous,” he celebrated “& their virtue will certainly perplex the Jacobin club.”

Although by the courage and conviction of France’s non-juring clergy must have certainly heartened Carroll, he nevertheless remained deeply pessimistic about the future of the church in that country. “The church is likely to lose France,” Carroll put to Plowden that October, “the schism is in its progress to a consummation: the enemies of religion there have had the art to connect pretended political liberty with the subversion of the Catholic faith; and thus the giddy multitude are deluded.” Carroll’s declamation of the revolutionary spirit, it seems, owed much to his reading of Edmund Burke’s 1790 Reflections on the

35 Charles Plowden to John Carroll, May 31, 1790. In John Carroll Papers, 6m5 Associated Archives, St. Mary’s Baltimore; Charles Plowden to John Carroll, Jan 31, 1791. In John Carroll Papers, 6n2 Associated Archives, St. Mary’s Baltimore.
Revolution in France, which Plowden recommended to him. “In general, I admire [Reflections] very much,” he wrote to Plowden in February 1792. “France is gone. I see, & I wish it may not be, irrecoverably: for Religion,” he wrote flatly. Unsurprisingly, Carroll was especially effusive in his approval of Burke’s critique of Richard Price – the non-conformist minister whose sermon praising the French Revolution had inspired Burke’s Reflections. “His observations on Dr. Price, applauding in a Christian pulpit the conduct of savage wretches, who committed the murders, & insulted their Sovereigns at Versailles, are a severe, tho just Philippic” Carroll commented admiringly. Although Burke’s writing helped to sharpen Carroll’s thinking on the French Revolution, it probably only exacerbated his already dim view of the church’s future in France.36

Upon hearing from Plowden of Louis XVI’s failed attempt to escape France in June of 1791, Carroll bemoaned the “distressing advices from France . . . and its late monarch for I have no doubt of his deposition by this time.” But this news arrived at the very moment that Carroll was welcoming the recently arrived Sulpicians to Baltimore. The juxtaposition between the Sulpicians’ successful immigration (aided by royal passports no less) with the failure of the king of France to make his own escape must have been arresting. Reflecting on the circumstances that delivered these learned men to his diocese, Carroll wrote Plowden that “if in many instances the French revolution has been fatal to religion, this country promises to derive advantage from it.” Arriving with Nagot

were “three other priests belonging to the establishment . . . a Procurator & two
professors.” There were also, wrote Carroll, “five seminarians . . . joined soon by
one or two natives of this Country. . . . Besides the Seminary, which will be the
source of many blessings, I expect some other valuable & useful priests.” Indeed,
Carroll informed Plowden, “one, well known to Mr. Nagot, is just arrived in
Virginia,” and still another priest, though not a Sulpician, had left with Nagot out
of “excessive sensibility at seeing the devastation of religion” in France.37

Even the preternaturally cautious Carroll could not bridle his optimism. “My
only apprehension respecting the Seminary is, a deficiency of means for its
support . . . in time, the whole of the Clergy here will be pupils of the Seminary, &
they will not fail to provide for their Alma Mater.” Plowden responded rapturously
to Carroll’s news. “I always consider you as a great instrument in the hands of
God” he praised his friend, “& [I] comfort myself with thoughts of you & your rising
church whenever the ruins of the French church rise to view.”38

***

The Sulpicians’ arrival in the United States came at a portentous moment
for the church. Only a few weeks afterward, on September 27, 1791, Carroll
issued a circular letter calling for the first diocesan synod of the American church.
Carroll had long prepared for this synod, having discussed its agenda at some

37 John Carroll to Charles Plowden, September 3, 1791. In JCP, I, 515-16. The priest who had
arrived in Virginia was Jean Dubois, the future founder of Mount Saint Mary’s Seminary in
Emmitsburg, Maryland, and later the bishop of New York.
38 John Carroll to Charles Plowden, September 3, 1791. In JCP, I, 515-16; Charles Plowden to
John Carroll, Oct. 31, 1791. In John Carroll Papers, 6N8.1 Associated Archives, St. Mary’s
Baltimore.
length with both Rome and Plowden in years prior. Remarkably, Nagot’s passport was printed on the reverse side of an invitation to the planned synod. But Nagot’s invitation listed no details beyond “Synodus Diocesana, An. 1791,” as Carroll had waited for the Sulpicians to arrive before he arranged specifics. The synod, Carroll decided, would be held only a few weeks following the invitations, on November 7, 1791 in Baltimore. The synod, Carroll announced, was to adjudicate those same matters he had outlined upon his return to the United States: “providing for the decent ordering of divine worship; of establishing uniformity in the administration of the sacraments, & discipline in the diocese; & in the exterior government of its Clergy; of concerting means for the extension of our Holy Religion; of devising means, if possible for the decent support of its ministers.”

In short, the synod was conservative in its form and in its scope. Carroll made this clear in his summation to Antonelli upon its conclusion, “there are no innovations in these decrees,” he wrote, “everything was copied from former synods. Nor did we attempt to legislate on all subjects, but only on those that are most pressing.” Carroll’s repeated insistence on theological soundness of the diocesan synod discloses that the distrust between Rome and Carroll that had framed so much of Carroll’s career thus far would persist even after the creation of the diocese of Baltimore. Moreover, Carroll’s insistence on theological...
orthodoxy, and legislative restraint is was seemingly an effort to ward off any concerns the Roman curia may have had that it had elevated a forthrightly patriotic American revolutionary to be a national bishop at the moment the church in France was being undone by revolutionaries that marshaled similar rhetoric in their cause.⁴⁰

Thus, Carroll continued to protest the synod’s unimportance, even as he reported to Rome at its conclusion and arranged to have its decrees sent to the Propaganda Fide. The particulars of the synod, he wrote to the Propaganda Fide, were “scarcely worth the attention of the Sacred Congregation except in so far as they may be regarded as a foreshadowing of what I and my successors may attempt for the promotion of the Catholic cause.” But Carroll’s studied modesty toward the Propaganda Fide was not an attempt to fleece his former superintendent. Instead, it reflected Carroll’s characteristically lucid efforts to instantiate Catholic orthodoxy within an American political culture that bore suspicious connections to the despised revolution in France. Carroll’s expression of Catholic orthodoxy in an American context was aided, in no small measure, by his having France as a foil.⁴¹

***

Whether by accident or providence, as the Catholic Church in the United States was emerging from its British colonial origins as a promising diocese, France, “the first daughter of the Church” since antiquity, was undergoing a

---

revolution that seemed to cut Catholicism out from that country root and branch. Thus, as Carroll worked diligently to establish an American Catholic Church, it was his deep connection to, and careful study of France that framed his thinking about ecclesiastical and secular governance, toleration and Christian pluralism, and the state’s proper deportment toward religion. In the years that followed Carroll’s diocesan synod, the revolution in France that had already driven François-Charles Nagot and his company to emigrate to the United States and John Carroll to articulate a distinctively American Catholicism only continued to intensify. Writing in 1794 to the Archbishop of Dublin, Carroll lamented the advance of “principles of anarchy and insurrection . . . [in] Europe.” The Irish prelate could certainly sympathize, as he too would spend much of the 1790s responding to incendiary political movements in his diocese. Carroll further decried “the prevailing spirit of ecclesiastical, no less than civil democracy” across the Atlantic world. He blamed for these ills the “dissemination of French political errors; our alliance with them, and the habits of intimacy formed during the war between many Americans and some French officers, who have since taken a leading part in their revolution.” Catherine O’Donnell’s insight that Carroll “crafted a church that thrived in a democracy without being democratic” is surely correct. And to a remarkable degree, Carroll’s principles, as well as his patriotism, was informed by his antipathy toward a multitude of “French political errors.”

Appendix A:

Nagot’s Passport, issued on the authority of Louis XVI and signed in Paris, March 1, 1791.
The reverse side of the passport: Nagot’s invitation to the diocesan synod in Baltimore.
“This very important & almost unbounded trust”: The Invasion of Quebec and the Making of an American Catholicism

In March of 1776, the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia formed a “Commission to Canada” as a last-ditch effort to turn the course of its faltering invasion of Quebec. Headed by Benjamin Franklin, as the cosmopolitan and urbane Philadelphian carried a gravitas none of his American contemporaries could match, the Commission was tasked with convincing Quebec's French and Catholic majority that “their Interest and ours are inseparably united.” Congress also selected two French-speaking and fervently patriotic Marylanders to accompany Franklin: Samuel Chase, an Annapolis attorney and a member of the Congress, and Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the scion of one of Maryland’s elite Catholic planter families and one of the wealthiest men in British North America. Finally, hoping to lend further credibility to its promise to “hold sacred the Rights of Conscience” and respect “the free and undisturbed Exercise of [the Quebecois] Relegion,” Congress implored Charles Carroll to include his cousin John Carroll, a French-educated Roman Catholic priest, as an auxiliary to the mission.1

The invasion of Quebec was, in seemingly every respect, a disaster that the Commission could not prevent. The Quebecois of course drew on long a history of enmity with their British colonial neighbors, but it was the Quebec Act, and the vituperative Anglo-American response to it, that undercut the Commission’s goals. Issued in summer of 1774, the Quebec Act offered official toleration of Roman Catholic worship and reinstated the church’s right to enforce its customary tithes in the province. Moreover, it restored French laws in personal matters and extended Quebec’s boundaries to encompass much of the Ohio River Valley, which Anglo-American colonists had long coveted. The Quebec Act caused a torrent of anti-Catholic rhetoric from across the United Colonies, to which Congress even contributed. While such a response was understandable amid the heightened tensions between Parliament and its colonies in the 1770s, it nevertheless doomed any later attempts by Congress to entice Quebec to join the colonial resistance to Great Britain. Thus, notwithstanding Congress’s repeated assurances that the Quebecois’ religion would be tolerated in a spirit of ecumenical cooperation, the people of Quebec found little reason to spurn the British in favor of the seemingly-duplicitious American patriots.²

Even though the Carrolls’ were willing to join the Commission to Canada, they well understood its prospects rested on military success. But plagued by

mismanagement, short on supplies and specie, and incapable of swaying the Quebecois to their cause, the collapsed not long after the Commissioners arrived in patriot-held Montreal. Indeed, no sooner had the Commissioners arrived in the province at the end of April than news arrived that British reinforcements had broken the Continentals’ siege of the heavily-fortified provincial capital at Quebec City and set their sights on recapturing Montreal. Recognizing that their effort was for naught, an ailing Benjamin Franklin quit Montreal and the Commission on May 12, and John Carroll accompanied him on his return to Philadelphia. Chase and Charles Carroll did not tarry much longer. Departing the city at the end of May, the Commission was abandoned only a few weeks after it began, and indeed, a few weeks before British troops recaptured Montreal and drove the Continental Army from the province entirely.³

The failed invasion of Quebec is an unlikely watershed in the history of American Catholicism. Indeed, it seems to caution against claims of friendship and common purpose across sectarian lines, which are relatively easy to affirm in writing, but are rather more difficult to establish in practice (especially at the point of a sword). However, squaring the circle between the intemperate attacks on the Quebec Act leveled by Congress and other American colonials and the promises of religious toleration and ecumenical cooperation that Congress also repeatedly offered the Quebecois requires an explanation beyond simple expediency. Even though the invasion of Quebec proved to be unsalvageable, Congress’s willingness to include the Carrolls in the Commission demonstrated that its members were not only disposed to offer religious liberty to Catholics in Quebec, but by 1776 it was also to impart significant responsibility upon certain American Catholics. Catholics in the English, and later the British Empire had called for such an opportunity since the Glorious Revolution had definitively excluded them from politics. In that light, the Carrolls’ service, even in an ill-fated mission, was portentous. When the Carrolls emerged with enhanced reputations in spite of the mission’s failure, even greater intellectual and institutional space was opened for Catholicism in the nascent American Republic.4

Thanks to the Carrolls’ education, status, and unimpeachable patriotism, Congress accepted that their religion did not preclude them from holding conventionally British political views. But it was no accident that the Congress recognized that the Carrolls politics was in accord with its own understanding of the rights and liberties due to Englishmen. Indeed, as scholars of American Catholicism have repeatedly emphasized, Maryland’s Catholic elite flatly rejected the premise, *de rigueur* in eighteenth-century British thought, that Catholicism was inherently incompatible with the English tradition of constitutional government and individual liberty. Compelled to cleave jealously to their British identity in the face of Protestant mistrust, and drawing on generations of experience in being deprived of what they regarded as their due rights as subjects, Maryland’s Catholic elite was uniquely positioned ideologically to embrace the patriot cause.\(^5\)

Moreover, Catholics in Maryland were the only substantial Catholic community in British North America—numbering some 15,000 in a colony that numbered close to 200,000 in 1776. And while the colony’s founding and early history was shaped by sectarian struggles, the Carroll family experienced the curtailment of the political and religious liberties Maryland’s Catholics had previous enjoyed in a manner both abrupt and deeply personal. In a 1771 letter to a distant French cousin, Charles Carroll of Carrollton recounted the “vain &

---

short lived hope” of the freedom his grandfather – also named Charles Carroll and called “the Settler” – hoped to gain “by a voluntary banishment from his country, family & friends . . . in the wilds of America.” But no sooner did he arrive in St. Mary's County Maryland in 1688 than the colonial government dominated by an appointed Catholic elite was unseated by Maryland’s Protestant majority, which was bolstered by the “Glorious Revolution” in England that had deposed the Catholic King James II in favor of the resolutely Protestant William of Orange and his co-regent Mary.⁶

Maryland’s new Protestant regime moved immediately to undermine statutory protections for Catholic religious practice and civil rights. The Anglican Church was established in the colony in 1702, and Catholics lost the right to vote in 1718. From that point forward Roman Catholics in eighteenth-century Maryland could not worship in public, vote or hold office in the colonial assembly, carry arms, or serve in the militia. But despite the infringement of political rights and religious liberty, Charles Carroll the Settler married into the wealthy Darnall family and thrived as a planter and merchant. Although his continued effort to regain the liberties lost to Maryland’s Catholics came to naught, he bequeathed both his fortune and his political ambitions to his inheritors. Writing of his own father, Charles Carroll of Annapolis, Charles Carroll of Carrollton affirmed a shared love of independence and “a well regulated oeconomy . . . as necessary means of attaining it.” His father’s “prudent management” Carroll wrote, “has

made him the richest individual in this province without the favour of government, even in opposition to it, & in spight of the many injustices suffered thro’ the envy of private & public persons."\(^7\)

***

Before the imperial crisis following the Seven Years’ War began to present new opportunities for Maryland’s Catholics to push for religious liberty and political rights, men like Charles Carroll of Carrollton were, understandably, uncertain about their prospects as Catholic subjects in a Protestant empire and were required to seek out opportunities outside of it. Although elites in British North America often chose to have their sons educated in Europe, for Maryland’s Catholics it was a necessity. Unable to enroll in the few institutions of higher learning in the colonies (or indeed, even to erect grammar schools of their own), Catholic colonials were compelled to educate their sons abroad—typically at the same French colleges that had educated English Catholics since the Protestant Reformation. Thus, when Charles Carroll of Carrollton left Annapolis for the Jesuit college at St. Omer in French Flanders in 1747 he found himself with many fellow Marylanders—including his distant cousin John Carroll. Eleven years old when he arrived in France, Carroll did not return to his native Maryland until 1765 when he was twenty-nine.\(^8\)

---

\(^7\) Charles Carroll of Carrollton to the Countess d’Auzouer, September 20, 1771. In *Dear Papa, Dear Charley*, 597.

As scholars have argued persuasively, education abroad paradoxically imbued Maryland Catholics with a love of their own country. While Charles Carroll of Carrollton’s extensive correspondence generally bears this out, it also reveals his consternation toward British anti-Catholicism. “I cannot conceive how any Roman Catholick,” Carroll wrote his father in 1759, “especially and Irish Roman Catholick can consent to Live in . . . any [of] the British dominions, if he is able to do otherwise.” Remarking on his mother’s affection toward Maryland, which “she seems to like . . . better than any other country,” Carroll, who had been absent from his family’s home for more than a decade, mused that “perhaps had she been so long absent from it, as I have been, that love so undeservedly bestowed on an ungreatfull country, wou’d be greatly diminished.” Despite this, in his more circumspect writing Carroll insisted that “if obligated to chuse between England & Maryland, to give preference to the latter.”

Although Carroll spent most of his early life in France and England, when he finally did choose to return to Maryland he did so convinced not only of his rights as an Englishman, but as a Catholic Marylander. “Whatever country I settle in,” he wrote his father in 1761, “its welfare & my honor shall be the chief and sole principle of my actions.” Having finished his education, which included the study of law at both the prestigious College Louis-le-Grand in Paris and the Inns of Court in London, Carroll returned to Maryland soon after Great Britain emerged victorious from the Seven Years’ War. The Carrolls’ prosperity in the
face of religiously-motivated discrimination, it seems, had convinced him to
“chuse to live under an english government rather than under any other . . . for I
know of no Catholick country where that greatest blessing civil liberty, is
enjoyed.” Carroll’s appraisal also clearly drew on his familiarity with France.
“Religious persecution is bad,” " his letter continued, “but civil persecution is still
more irksome: the one is quite insupportable, the other is alleviated by superior
motives, which . . . enable us to bear it with greater resignation.” Carroll’s
resolution reveals the earnestness and integrity that would come to define him
amid the American Revolution. But it also demonstrates the extent to which
Carroll had worked out how his Catholic faith comported with his British political
sensibilities.10

***

Upon his return to Maryland in 1765, Carroll found the American Colonies
engaged in vigorous opposition to Parliament’s tax on colonial commodities
intended to raise revenue to pay for the recently concluded war against France.
Insofar as Charles Carroll of Carrollton was concerned, religion was a non-issue
in the colonists’ dispute with Great Britain. Nevertheless, because their faith kept
Catholic Marylanders in a marginal position politically within the colony, in time,
the political crisis spurred many of Maryland’s Catholics – including both Charles
Carroll and his father – to take more radical positions than their Protestant peers.
But at first, Carroll claimed satisfaction in abdicating from the politics of the day.

10 CCC to CCA, January 1, 1761. In Dear Papa, Dear Charley, 193.
“I resolved never to give myself the least concern about politicks,” he wrote to his friend Edmund Jenings in 1767, but rather remain “independent & I hope virtuous, for virtue & independency are seldom separate.”

But while Carroll was orthodox in both his Roman Catholicism and his English constitutionalism, he was a far more ardent in his support for the latter. Writing Jenings in 1767, shortly after his return to Maryland, Charles Carroll began to put forward his own theory of Enlightenment-inflected Christian toleration. Bemoaning some “shocking instances of religious fanaticism” among both French Catholics and British Protestants in the “two most civilized” states in Europe, he argued that “were an unlimited toleration allowed of & men of all sects were to converse freely with each other, their aversion from a difference of religious principles would soon ware away.” Writing to his father in 1759, Carroll explained that he did not “aim . . . for canonization” and professed a dislike for “scrued up devotion, distorted fa[ce]s, & grimace.” “I observe my religious duties, [and] I trust in the mercies of God” he wrote, and “abhor[red] those, who laugh at all devotion, look upon our religion as a fiction.” But Carroll also admitted that “I love him tho’ far less than . . . I cou’d wish to do.”

---

12 CCC to CCA, January 1, 1761. In Dear Papa, Dear Charley, 193; CCC to Edmund Jenings, August 13, 1767. In Ibid., 432.
On the whole, Charles Carroll’s confidence in the palliative capacity of religious tolerance and was undergirded by a general disinterest in theology. “I could wish,” he wrote Jenings 1766,

that the unhappy differences & disputes on speculative points of Theology had been confined to divines . . . . The savage wars & cruel massacres, the deliberate murders committed by law, under the sanction of Religion have not reformed the morals of men they have indeed answered the purposes of ambition & fury, they have glutted the Revenge of an enraged Party & sometimes too they have served the cravings of Lust.

“In this enlightened age,” he concluded, “we have no reason to expect a renewal of such horrors: but were men as easily misled, there would not be wanting leaders to encourage & incite them & to act the scene over again.”13

The conversion of several prominent Marylanders, including Charles Calvert, fifth Baron Baltimore had likewise convinced Carroll that lighter forms of religious persecution were far more effective. “If none but who professed the established religion were admitted to posts of profit & trust,” his letter to Jenings continued, “and the exclusion of all others made the sole punishment of their dissenting from the established mode of faith, this measure might probably make more proselytes thereto, than even the rigorous execution of penal laws.” But Carroll, like his forbears with whom he shared a name, rejected this route.

Responding in 1774 to his English friend William Graves’s query why he ought

---

13 CCC to Edmund Jenings, October 14, 1766. In Dear Papa Dear Charley.
not convert out of political expediency, Carroll responded forcefully. If “all modes of Religion . . . [are] indifferent to our Creator, I may as well embrace that, which my countrymen have embraced.” “What then do you advise me to?” he demanded. “To quit a false religion & to adopt one equally false, & this merely to humour the prejudices of fools or to be on a footing with Knaves. I have too much Sincerity & too much pride to do either.”

Nonetheless, Charles Carroll’s sincerity and pride did not constrain him from leveling criticism on his church. “I am a warm friend of Toleration,” his letter to Graves continued. “I execrate the intollerating spirit of the Church of Rome, and of other Churches—for she is not singular in that.” But tellingly, he took aim not at church doctrine, but rather, the “designing & selfish men invented religious tests to exclude from posts of profit & trust their weaker or more conscientious fellow subjects; thus to secure to themselves all the emoluments of government.” In other words, the Catholic intolerance that Carroll attacked was substantially the same as the government of Maryland that had stripped its Catholic inhabitants of their liberties. But of greater importance, Carroll was also willing to write forcefully in favor of the great Whig shibboleth: the Glorious Revolution. “Should a King,” Carroll wrote in a 1773 essay, “endeavor to subvert that constitution in church and state . . . resistance would not only be excusable, but praiseworthy.” “The Revolution” Carroll concluded, “is justly ranked among the most glorious deeds, that have done honour to the character of Englishmen.”

---

14 CCC to William Graves, August 15, 1774. In Dear Papa, Dear Charley, 726.
As the British imperial crisis intensified, opportunities began to arise for Catholic Marylanders to once again assert themselves in the realm of politics. No longer reticent to make his political views known, Carroll thrust headlong into the patriot cause. As colonial hostility toward Great Britain threatened to erupt into violence in the early 1770s, Carroll lampooned the idea that religious differences would preclude him from taking on a position of leadership. “If my countrymen judge me incapable of serving them in a public station for believing the moon to be made of green cheese,” he wrote William Graves in 1774, “in this respect their conduct (if not wicked) is not less absurd than my belief.” Quickly emerging as one of Maryland’s staunchest patriots, Carroll gained notoriety – and patriotic bona fides – as an essayist. He parlayed this to electoral success in the few contests now opened to Catholics. He thus served on local committees of correspondence, and in 1774 was elected as a delegate to the Convention in Annapolis. His elevation to the Convention, which served as the effective government of Maryland until 1776, meant that a Catholic Carroll wielded significant political power in Maryland for the first time since Charles Carroll the Settler.16

That Charles Carroll gained the confidence of his fellow Marylanders was, itself, significant. But it took the advent of the war and the invasion of Quebec to

---

16 CCC to William Graves, August 15, 1774. In Dear Papa, Dear Charley, 726; See Hoffman, Princes of Ireland, Planters of Maryland, 265-302.
launch Carroll into a wider political arena. The patriotic fervor that swept him into the Annapolis Convention in the summer of 1774 was in reaction to the punitive measures enacted by the British Parliament in response to the Boston Tea Party. Writing William Graves in August of that, Carroll confidently asserted colonial unity “from Boston to Georgia.” But by issuing the Quebec Act in early 1774, Parliament “cast a bomb . . . into this era of good feelings for Catholics.” Although the timing of the Quebec Act was almost certainly unintentional, Anglo-American patriots quickly included it among the other “intolerable acts” and decried it vociferously when news of it arrived that summer.17

Indeed, the Quebec Act was seemingly tailored to induce the fury of Protestant American patriots. It extended to the Quebecois “the free Exercise of the Religion of the Church of Rome, subject to the King’s Supremacy” and removed references to the Protestant faith from the oath of loyalty to the crown thereby allowing Quebec’s Catholics to hold office. Moreover, it restored French civil law in private matters, and permitted the Catholic Church to collect the traditional tithes. Finally, it extended Quebec’s boundaries to encompass much of the Ohio River Valley, which the seaboard-bound colonists had long coveted. Thus, to many Anglo-American Protestants, the provisions were nothing less than a return to the “popery and arbitrary power” of the government of James II—and indeed of Maryland’s Calvert regime. Pamphlets, sermons, and speeches throughout Anglophone North America decried the injustice that – in the words of

one New York essayist – a “superstitious, bigoted Canadian Papist, though ever so profligate was esteemed a better subject . . . than a liberal, enlightened new England Dissenter, though ever so virtuous.”

***

Although no Catholics served in the First Continental Congress, when it convened in Philadelphia in September 1774 members of the Maryland delegation insisted that Charles Carroll accompany them. The anti-Catholic reaction to the Quebec Act was then at its peak, and the Congress began immediately to craft an official response to the “intolerable acts” (with the Quebec Act included among them). On October 14, it sent an appeal to George III. “The Declaration of Rights and Grievances” averred the “intolerable acts” to be “impolitic, unjust, and cruel, as well as unconstitutional” and thus a threat to subvert the colonists “religion, laws, and liberties.” Congress followed this litany of protestations with a series of letters, which in their attempts to justify their actions to multiple audiences and through differing lines of argumentation, couched its posture toward the Catholic Quebecois in rhetoric so incongruent that it has come to serve as an object-lesson in counterproductive diplomacy.

On October 21, Congress issued an “Address to the People of Great Britain.” The “Address” and similar appeals marshalled the familiar rhetoric of “popery and arbitrary power” for its intended British audience. Congress wisely

---

18 New York Journal, March 30, 1775; See Creviston, “No King unless it be a Constitutional King” passim.
presented themselves as English “descend[ants] from the same common ancestors . . . who have carefully conveyed the same fair inheritance to us.” In claiming “all the benefits secured to the subject by the *English* Constitution” it expressed “astonishment that a *British* Parliament should ever consent to establish . . . a religion that has deluged your Island in blood, and disbursed impiety, bigotry, persecution, murder, and rebellion through every part of the world.” Although Congress was careful not to attack George III directly, journals were less cautious. To cite an example Carroll would likely have read, that September, the *Maryland Gazette* contended “the Quebec bill is . . . the most infamous and despotic; it makes George III ten thousand times more arbitrary than Louis XV.”

But despite the provocative rhetoric against the Quebec Act, Charles Carroll was untroubled when he read Congress’s “Address to the People of Great Britain.” Writing to his father on the day it was drafted, he blithely commented he had “seen the petition of the Congress to the King, & the memorial to the Canadians” but he made no mention of its contents. Carroll, it seems, recognized the genre in which the attacks on King and Parliament were written, as he used such tropes himself. But while the anti-Catholic rhetoric of the “Address to the People of Great Britain” was evidently unremarkable to Carroll, Congress’s portrayal of the Quebecois as “detached from our interests, by civil as well as religious prejudices,” and thus “fit instruments . . . to reduce the ancient, free,

---

20 Address to the People of Great Britain,” 1774; *Maryland Gazette*, September 1, 1774. In Creviston “No King unless it be a Constitutional King,” 472.
Protestant Colonies to the same state of slavery with themselves,” severely undermined its concurrent effort to present themselves as allies in a shared colonial cause against Great Britain.21

Mere days after the “Address to the People of Great Britain,” Congress issued turned its attention to the Quebecois. In its “Letter to the Inhabitants of the Province of Quebec,” Congress now sought to portray the Quebecois as “our brave enemies . . . become our hearty friends” and attempted to establish a collective front against “Ministers of . . . flagrurous temper, [who] have dared to violate the most sacred compacts and obligations.” Moreover, in direct contradiction to the language of the “Address to the People of Great Britain,” Congress mawkishly insisted that “we are too well acquainted with the liberality of sentiment distinguishing your nation, to imagine, that difference of religion will prejudice you against a hearty amity with us.” Then, in a didactic flourish, the letter offered “to explain some of [the] more important branches” of the “invaluable rights, that form a considerable part of our mild system of government.” Congress, the letter declared, “esteem[ed] it our duty,” as the Quebecois were “educated under another form of government.”22

After enumerating the canon of English constitutional liberties, Congress took aim at the toleration of Catholicism ensconced in the Quebec Act. “What is offered to you by the late Act of Parliament?” it asked, “Liberty of conscience in your religion? No. God gave it to you.” Invoking Montesquieu, the “Letter”  

21 CCC to CCA, October 26, 1774. In Dear Papa, Dear Charley, 753; Address to the People of Great Britain,” 1774.
22 “Letter to the Inhabitants of the Province of Quebec,” October 26, 1774.
exhorted the Quebecois to “seize the opportunity presented to you by Providence itself. You have been conquered into liberty, if you act as you ought.” When Congress addressed the King and the people of Great Britain, it did so in the language of Whig politics. But in its letter to the Quebecois, they now appealed to Enlightenment notions of liberality. Indeed, the “Letter” promised religious toleration to the Quebecois, on the grounds that the “transcendant nature of freedom elevates those, who unite in her cause, above all . . . low-minded infirmities.”23

***

But Congress’s messages to the people of Great Britain and Quebec in the fall of 1774 did at least hold one thing in common: both acknowledged that Quebec was of central importance to American patriots for reasons both ideological and strategic. Writing to John Adams that January, Samuel Chase voiced the precariousness of the patriots’ position: “Quebec must at every Hazard be ours” he inveighed. “I think the success of the War will, in great Measure, depend on securing Canada to our Confederation.” Just as Congress moved to immediately develop its strategy toward Quebec, so too did the Continental Army direct its first major offensive campaign toward its northern frontier. Having captured Fort Ticonderoga in May of 1775, Continental forces under Generals Philip Schuyler and Richard Montgomery used this stronghold at the southern base of Lake Champlain to stage an invasion of the Province of Quebec. Lancing northward that August in a two-pronged assault, the

23 Ibid.
Continents quickly took Montreal before hastening toward the provincial capital of Quebec City to meet with Benedict Arnold’s troops advancing on the heavily fortified city from New England.24

Had the fight for Quebec City transpired differently, perhaps both the political and religious history of North America would have taken a radically different form. But the battle, which took place from the 30th to the 31st of December, was a decisive defeat for the Continental Army. Disastrously for the army’s further prospects in Quebec, General Montgomery was among the dead. Reflecting on the significance of the general’s loss to the invasion, Charles Carroll of Carrollton remarked to his father that “in him we lossed not only a General but a statesman—the affections of the Canadians, it is said, lean on the side of our enemies: while Montgomery commanded they were generally with us.”25

Following its defeat at Quebec City, the Continental Army settled into an ineffectual siege of the capital. As the winter of 1775-1776 set in, Congress sought to shore up its position in Canada both militarily and politically. In January, it issued another letter to the Quebecois. The invasion, Congress regretted, was necessary as “your liberty, your honour, and your happiness, are essentially and necessarily connected with the unhappy contest which we have


25 CCC to CCA, April 15, 1776. In Dear Papa, Dear Charley, 896; Anderson, The Battle for the Fourteenth Colony, 139-69.
been forced into for the defence of our dearest privileges.” But claiming to have “no other views than those of strengthening and establishing the cause of liberty,” the letter vowed to “never abandon you to the unrelenting fury of your and our enemies.” In its latest appeal to the Quebecois, Congress made no reference to religion whatsoever. However, even as it was drafting its most recent letter, Congress began to form a “Commission to Canada” that would take square aim at the Quebecois’ Roman Catholicism.26

In creating the Commission to Canada, Congress took on a bold new strategy. It neither sought to disparage “Papism” as it had in the “Address to the People of Great Britain,” nor did it address the Quebecois as practitioners of an alien faith, as it had done in prior entreaties. Instead, by including Charles Carroll and his cousin, Father John Carroll in the Commission, Congress not only gave substance to its offer of religious toleration and political inclusion for the Roman Catholic Quebecois, by installing American Catholics to serve as its representatives, Congress set an important precedent for the American Republic.

***

Congress placed Benjamin Franklin at the head of the Commission. “His masterly Acuquantance with the French Language, his extensive Correspondence in France, his great Experience in Life, his Wisdom, Prudence, Caution: his engaging Address: united to his unshaken Firmness in the present American system of Politicks and War,” praised John Adams, “point him out as

26 “Letter to the Inhabitants of the Province of Canada”, January 24, 1776.
the fittest Character, for this momentous Undertaking." Charles Carroll's inclusion, however, relied on the support of Adams support and several other unlikely allies. "I would earnestly recommend Charles Carroll to be one of your Deputies to Canada," wrote Chase, the son one of Maryland's most prominent Anglican clergymen. "His Attachment and zeal to the Cause, his abilities, his Acquaintance with the Language, Manners, and Customs of France and his Religion, with the Circumstance of a very great Estate, all point him out to that all importance service." 27

Although he was certainly not known for mild views on Roman Catholicism, John Adams agreed enthusiastically with Chase's suggestion. Finding himself "much pleased with his Conversation," Adams, who presided over Congress's Board of War and Ordinance, lauded Charles Carroll's "Zeal Fortitude and Perseverance . . . in the Cause of American Liberty." But while Adams noted Carroll's "liberal Education in France," and that he, like Franklin, was "well acquainted with the french nation," it was his Catholic faith that convinced Adams that he would be such a valuable asset to the Commission. "What is perhaps of more Consequence [than his knowledge of France]" his letter to James Warren continued, was that Carroll "was educated in the Roman Catholic Religion, and Still continues to worship his Maker according to the Rites of that Church." Adams was satisfied that by appealing directly to the Quebecois'

---
Catholicism Congress had “at last hit upon a Plan which promises fair for Success” in Canada.  

But including Charles Carroll in the Commission was only part of Congress’s strategy. “We have impowered the Committee to take with them another Gentleman of Maryland, Mr. John Carroll, a Roman Catholic Priest, and a Jesuit, a Gentleman of learning and Abilities” noted Adams. John Carroll had likewise gained the regard of the General Charles Lee, who commented to John Hancock that “if some Jesuit . . . (but he must be a man of liberal sentiments, enlarged mind and a manifest friend to Civil Liberty) could be found out and sent to Canada, he would be worth battallions to us.” “This thought,” Lee wrote, “was far from a wild one. Charles Carroll has a relative who exactly answers the description.” Although Adams clearly intended for John Carroll to play only the relatively minor role of “administer[ing] Baptism to the Canadian Children, and bestow[ing] Absolution upon Such as have been refused it by the toryfied Priests in Canada,” Carroll himself seemed to have envisioned a grander duty: to appeal to Quebec’s staunchly pro-British Catholic hierarchy. 

If Charles Carroll’s moderate, Enlightenment-inflected Catholicism made his religion more palatable to Congress, the same could not be said of John Carroll. Following the Carrolls’ early education at St. Omer, whereas Charles Carroll chose to pursue the law and business, John Carroll decided upon a career in the church. Having taught theology in Jesuit schools in France and

---

Belgium for nearly two decades, John Carroll had only returned to Maryland in the wake of the suppression of the Jesuits by Pius VI in 1773. Although John Carroll’s support of the patriot cause was as unquestionable as his cousin’s, he was a man of the church above all else. In the draft of an apparently unsent letter, John Carroll contemplated Congress’s request that he join the Commission to Canada. Although grateful for “the distinguished & unexpected honour of desiring me to accompany the Committee,” Carroll nevertheless feared that he would “betray the confidence” of Congress, “and perhaps disappoint their expectations, were I not to . . . plainly tell them how little service they can hope to derive from my presence” and admitted concern that his vocation “render[ed] [him] . . . a very unfit person to be employed in negotiations.” Although he expressed a disregard for his “personal safety amidst the present distress of my country,” for reasons quite different from his cousin, Carroll was unsure that he was a suitable representative in diplomatic and administrative mission.30

But it was not only his concern about his own abilities that caused Carroll to hesitate at Congress’s invitation. His response also displayed a predisposition against the collusion of religion and politics that would typify his posture during his many years as a leading Roman Catholic cleric in the United States. “I have observed,” he wrote, “that when the ministers of Religion leave their duties of their profession to take a busy part in political matters, they generally fall into contempt; & sometimes even bring discredit to the cause, in whose service they

are engaged.” Moreover, Carroll also expressed skepticism at the Commission’s prospects for success. “If it be proposed that the Canadians should concur with the other colonies” he wrote, “I apprehend it will not be in my power to advise them to it.” More attuned than his cousin, and certainly the Congress, to the views of Quebec’s Catholics, Carroll seemed certain that most Quebecois were reasonably satisfied by the Quebec Act’s provisions. “They have not the same motives for taking up arms against England,” Carroll remarked, “which render the resistance of the other colonies so justifiable.” Likewise, Carroll balked at Congress’s reckoning of its invasion, that the Quebecois were fellow-sufferers under tyranny. “If an oppressive mode of government has been given them,” he argued, then “it was what some of them chose, & the rest have acquiesced in.”

Although Charles Carroll was far more optimistic on outset for the Commission’s prospects than his cousin, he too feared the consequences should the mission end in failure. Writing to his father the day he was appointed, he confessed that he “tremble[d] at the thought of this very important & almost unbounded trust.” “The confidence placed by the Congress in the Commissioners is highly honourable,” he wrote, “but I feel it burdensome: what if we should not please?” As the lofty aims of the Commission weighed on him, Carroll’s self-confidence wavered. “If the Congress had any opinion of my abilities,” he wrote his father, “they were certainly mistaken.” He submitted, nevertheless, that he did possess “integrity, a sincere love for my country, a detestation of Tyranny.” “All I

31 Ibid.
want,” he concluded “is the approbation of my own mind and the applause of my countrymen.”

***

After a month of debate and revision, Congress issued its instructions to the Commission on the twenty-first of March. It imparted broad powers over the military as well as the civil administration in patriot-held Montreal and its environs. Additionally, Congress instructed the Commission to assure the Quebecois “that it is our earnest Desire to adopt them into our Union as a Sister Colony, and to secure the same general System of mild and equal Laws for them and for ourselves, with only such local Differences, as may be agreeable to each Colony.” To be sure, the missive promised the Quebecois “the free and undisturbed Exercise of their Relegion, and to the Clergy the full, perfect, and peaceable Possession and Enjoyment of all [the Quebecois’] Estates.” But freedom of religion was to be absolute. “All other Denominations of Christians,” Congress directed, were to “be equally entituled to hold Offices and enjoy civil Privileges . . . and be totally exempt from the Payment of any Tythes or Taxes for the Support of any Relegion.” In short, the toleration that Congress envisioned was different from that ensconced in the Quebec Act. Instead of affirming the dominance of the Catholic Church within the province, Congress prescribed wholesale religious disestablishment.

---

32 CCC to CCA, March 21, 1776. In Dear Papa, Dear Charley, 883.
Charles Carroll was pleased to learn that Congress had charged the Commission to make “the most explicit declarations . . . with respect to religious toleration.” Because it comported with his own inclinations toward disestablishment and toleration, Carroll believed that Congress’s policy toward the church in Quebec would be effective. “If we take Quebec,” he wrote his father that March, “I think it will not be very difficult to draw the Canadians into the union on certain terms.” “I am sure it is in their interest” he asserted, “and the Congress is disposed to . . . convince them of this disposition.” Writing again a few days later, Carroll expressed hope that “we shall settle matters in that country to the satisfaction of Congress, & with tolerable dispatch.” Even so, he well understood that the Commission’s prospects relied on continued military success. As weeks passed and the Commissioners departure from Philadelphia pushed until early April due to inclement weather, the Continental Army’s tenuous hold on Canada loosened—its siege of Quebec City was unlikely to succeed if British reinforcements arrived with the spring, and its rule in Montreal was increasingly unpopular amid mismanagement and increasing debt. Charles Carroll’s hope for the Commission’s success dimmed, and he complained of being “exceedingly tired of being inactive” in Philadelphia.34

***

Scholars tend to agree, and the course of history bears out, that the Commission to Canada came on too late for it to succeed. Indeed, it is largely

viewed as a last, desperate attempt by Congress to win over the population and turn the tide of the campaign. Nevertheless, when the Commission finally trekked northward at the end of March – first to New York, then up the Hudson River toward Lake Champlain – Charles Carroll held to his hope that with a resurgent military campaign, and “good management we shall engage the Canadians if not in the union, at least to observe the strictest neutrality.” But as defeat at Quebec City began to seem inevitable, Carroll soon shifted his opinion. “We shall not evacuate Canada,” he now asserted, “but fortify some post on the St. Laurence to prevent the enemy from penetrating into that country.”

The Commission arrived in Montreal at the end of April. Soon afterward, Charles Carroll wrote his father that he had “not yet seen enough of the town or of the people to describe the one, or venture my sentiments of the other,” but of the “very few . . . french Inhabitants. The ladies are very agreeable, lively, and truly polite: there is an ease and Softeness in their manners . . . and at the first glance discovers the last polish of an excellent education.” A week later, he reported the Quebecois he encountered to be “very friendly,” and chirped confidently that “a just & conciliating conduct on our part . . . particularly if seconded by successful military operations will reestablish our affairs in this Colony and fix the affections of the People to the Colonies.”

36 CCC to CCA, April 30, 1776. In Dear Papa, Dear Charley, 901; CCC to CCA, May 5, 1776. In Dear Papa, Dear Charley, 905.
John Carroll’s more pessimistic prognosis, however, put the lie to his cousin’s blithe optimism. His futile efforts to treat with Montreal’s Catholic community demonstrated the gulf that existed between these two Catholic communities. Even before the Commission arrived in the province, the Bishop of Quebec, Jean-Olivier Briand, arguing that “no other sect has persecuted the Church of Rome like that of the Bostonnais [a derogatory term for Anglo-American Protestants],” forbade any priest in his diocese to consult with Carroll under penalty of excommunication. Indeed, Carroll’s efforts to curry favor with the Quebecois faithful failed so spectacularly that the episode spawned an oft-repeated tale that Briand excommunicated Carroll himself. Even though the story is certainly fabricated, its plausibility underscores the fact of Carroll’s haplessness and Congress’s incredible miscalculation.37

Though they were already proving ineffectual, scarcely had the Commissioners reached Montreal than was its comedy of errors interrupted by the arrival of British reinforcements into the province. Quickly lifting the siege at Quebec City and scattering the Continental Army in the process, British troops under Quebec governor Guy Carleton set their sights up the St. Laurence River and to Montreal. “The principle part of our Commission,” wrote Carroll of Franklin, “is frustrated by this sudden turn of affairs.” The Commission to Canada, which

Bibliography


____. “Ecumenical Stirrings: Catholic-Protestant Relations during the Episcopacy of John Carroll” Church History 45 no. 3 (September 1976): 358-76.


Carter, Michael S. “‘Under the Benign Sun of Toleration’ Mathew Carey, the Douai Bible, and Catholic Print Culture, 1789–91.” *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (Fall 2007), 437–69.

Carter, Michael S. “‘What Shall We Say to this Liberal Age?: Catholic-Protestant Controversy in the Early National Capital.” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 26 no. 2 (Spring 2008): 78–95.


Creviston, Vernon P. “No King unless it be a Constitutional King: Rethinking the Place of the Quebec Act in the Coming of the American Revolution.” *The Historian* 73 (Fall 2011): 463-79.


Meranze, Michael and Saree Makdisi, eds. Imagining the British Atlantic after the American Revolution. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015.


had held the chimera of achieving unity among Great Britain’s North American colonies had collapsed almost immediately. 38

On May 12, 1776, Benjamin Franklin resigned the Commission and quit Montreal. Only now did Charles Carroll admit that “our stay can be of no great service.” He and Chase did resolve to remain in Montreal for some time longer—but only because their sudden departure “would discourage our troops and friends in the country.” Amid the collapse of the Commission – and indeed the nadir of his fledgling political career – Carroll wrote to his father that he had “never suffered so much uneasiness in my life.” He and Chase tarried only a few weeks longer, leaving Montreal at the end of May. By mid-June the British had retaken the city and the Americans were driven definitively from Quebec.39

***

Even though the Commission to Canada was a prodigious misadventure, it nevertheless yielded tangible results for the Carrolls—and, indeed, for American Catholicism. When Franklin abandoned the Commission, John Carroll chose to accompany him. If he had not gained Franklin’s favor while serving the Commission, Carroll’s “friendly Assistance and tender Care” during their weeks-long return from Montreal certainly did.40

---

38 CCC to CCA, May 10, 1776. In Dear Papa, Dear Charley, 907.
40 Benjamin Franklin to Charles Carroll and Samuel Chase, May 27, 1776. In The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, XXII, 440.
Though infrequent correspondents, Franklin and John Carroll wrote to each other warmly in the years following the Commission. In one such letter, Carroll expressed satisfaction that Franklin was once again in Paris—where his “fellow traveler to and from Canada” served as Ambassador to France from 1776 to 1785. “You are much in mode at Paris,” Carroll wrote, “and as that is said to be every thing there, it is a good prognostick of your political success.” Carroll’s letter concludes with a patriotic flourish: “You are undoubtedly happy in the Society of many agreeable persons & in the enjoyments furnished by a fine civilized country,” wrote the man who had spent nearly twenty years in France himself. “Still I flatter myself that you will once again revisit this Western world. If you do, there will then be here a new order of things, a new combination of ideas & pursuits; indeed it will be truly the new world.” 41

For his part, Franklin proved advantageous to John Carroll’s ecclesiastical career on at least one occasion. As the Catholic Church in the United States was being organized in the newly independent United States, a papal representative in Paris entreated the American Ambassador for his recommendation. The cleric recorded Franklin’s enthusiastic response: “the ex-Jesuit, Mr. Carroll of Maryland, has been spoken to me with eulogy,” wrote the Papal Nuncio, Vitaliano Borromeo, “the same [man] who was educated at St. Omer and who in 1776 was sent by the Congress to Canada with Mr. Franklin.” Thanks in part to Franklin’s testimony, John Carroll was appointed Apostolic Prefect to the United States in

1784; in 1790 he was installed as the first Roman Catholic bishop in the American Republic.42

Franklin likewise continued to cultivate a genial relationship with Charles. Writing from France in 1779, Franklin averred that he “Shall never forget the Pleasure I had in your Campagny on our Journey to Canada. Please to remember me when you write to your other Compagnons de Voyage.” In a 1781 letter to Franklin, Carroll – who was then serving in the Maryland Senate – reminisced about “the pleasing hours we passed together on our way to Canada.” Though neither could claim to have enjoyed their time together in Canada, Carroll used the recollection to “wish that the Canadians were confederated with us.” Turning his attention to the peace treaty with Great Britain that Franklin was presently negotiating, Carroll implored Franklin that “in the mean time I hope measures will be taken . . . to reduce Canada to much narrower bounds, than the british Parliament lately gave it.”43

***

Charles Carroll’s letter to Benjamin Franklin calls attention to the profound significance of Quebec and its people to the course of the American Revolution. The province possessed strategic importance and its Catholic inhabitants had long been Anglo-Americans’ imperial rivals. For these reasons that the Quebec Act was seen by British colonials as such a provocation, and ensured the act

42 In Melville, John Carroll of Baltimore, 54-70 (quote, 68-69).
43 Benjamin Franklin to Charles Carroll, June 2, 1779. In The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, XXIX, 603; Charles Carroll to Benjamin Franklin, May 7, 1781. In Ibid., XXXV, 39. Hoffman, Princes of Ireland, Planters of Maryland, 303-33.
would be a catalyst to the war that gave rise to the American Republic. But as American patriots painfully separated themselves from Great Britain both politically and ideologically, Catholics in the used that rupture to find space to push for religious toleration and political inclusion.

The invasion of Quebec is a moment of underappreciated importance in the creation of an American Catholicism. In seeking to draw the Quebecois into the struggle with Great Britain, Congress slowly proved willing to expand the limits of toleration for Catholicism. The inclusion of the Carrolls in the Commission to Canada proved that some American Catholics were within that pale. Moreover, while the mission itself was a failure, it nevertheless offered the Carrolls an invaluable opportunity to gain the respect of their Protestant countrymen. Thus, as Anglo-American Protestants proved willing to “adopt every Scheme to reduce G[reat] B[ritain] to our Terms,” John Adams came to recognize that Charles Carroll would “hereafter make a greater Figure in America,” and John Carroll came to gain the respect of Benjamin Franklin. But it was not simply personal regard that the Carrolls earned. Instead, the episode helped to bear out John Carroll’s assertion that Americans had experienced a “Religious . . . revolution, if possible, more extraordinary than the political one.”

---