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Blast From the Past: John Carroll

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 1, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The first census showed that America had almost 4 million souls of whom only about 35,000 were Catholics, that is a little less than one percent.

If the French Alliance and the wide diversity of faiths had both helped take the anti-RC edge off the new republic, a third factor, the patriotism of the leading Catholic families in Maryland not only helped during the Revolution but made Maryland the natural focal point of the young Church.

Fr. John Carroll, the cousin of Charles Carroll of Carrollton -- the only Catholic to sign the Declaration of Independence -- had been named superior of the American missions in 1784. In this capacity he wrote to the Holy See requesting a new bishop and, as well, that in this first instance -- and cognizant of American sensibilities -- that the first bishop be nominated by a free vote of the clergy. The Holy See gave its assent and, gathering in a chapel at White Marsh in Maryland, the priests of America selected John Carroll to be their first bishop.

The chapel can still be seen ?- most of the room is now part of the sacristy -- at the Church of the Sacred Heart in Bowie. The Holy See confirmed the selection and Carroll traveled to England where he was ordained bishop of Baltimore in 1790. His diocese included the entire United States at the time.

Carroll was a natural leader and he embarked upon several projects that survive to this day. He founded Georgetown University. He built the Cathedral of the Assumption in Baltimore, recently restored and extraordinary in its small ?r? republican architectural sensibilities. He recruited the Sulpicians, who were fleeing the Revolution in France, to come and open a seminary in Baltimore and St. Mary?s is still flourishing. He established good relations with the federal government, which relations would largely characterize the relationship of Church and State through most of the subsequent history of the Church in America.

He also set limits on the degree to which American mores affected the early Church, for example beating back trusteeism which first reared its head in Philadelphia when a group of German Catholics -- unhappy with their English-speaking pastors -- set up their own parish and recruited a German pastor without Carroll?s approval. Carroll fought trusteeism throughout his tenure.

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