



Carmelite Spiritual Center

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Life is Worth Living

FIRST AMERICAN BISHOP JOHN CARROLL

DIRECTED U.S. CATHOLIC CHURCH WISELY

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

Some 200 years ago Bishop John Carroll was appointed by the Vatican as the first leader of the fledging Catholic Church in America following the successful Revolutionary War against England. He is still today regarded as one of the truly great leaders in the history of the Catholic Church here, and was also instrumental in setting many of the policies in regard to the relationship between our Church and the new American nation which are still in vogue to this day. Without Bishop John Carroll, the history of the Church and its people in the U.S. might well be quite different, especially for the large number of European immigrants who arrived at our shores seeking both political and religious freedom.

Birth in Maryland

The first American bishop was born on Jan. 8, 1735 in Upper Marlboro, Md., the third of seven children born to Daniel and Eleanor (Darnell) Carroll, members of a distinguished Irish Catholic family. On his paternal side, baby John Carroll was descended from the well-known Keane Carroll of Ireland, the elder brother of Charles Carroll who emigrated to Maryland in 1688, and later served as attorney general for the colony which was the first in America to grant religious freedom to all.

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On his maternal side, the child was a Darnell of the American branch of a distinguished family founded by Col. Henry Darnell, brother-in-law of Lord Baltimore who founded the Maryland Colony. John Carroll's brother, Daniel (1733-1829), later served as a member of the Continental Congress from 1780-84, and the Constitutional Congress in Philadelphia in 1789. Daniel Carroll also served in the U.S. Congress as a representative for Maryland from 1789-91. In addition, he was appointed one of three commissioners to lay out the site of the new national capital in Washington, D.C., and actually donated a quarter of the land for the new nation's capital.

Another prominent member of the Family was a cousin, Charles Carroll (1737-1832), who was the last living signer of the Declaration of Independence, and later served as both a senator and representative for Maryland in the U.S. Congress.

Education in Europe

Due to restrictive anti-Catholic laws in the American Colonies, both John Carroll and his cousin, Charles Carroll, went to Saint Omer in France in 1748 to obtain a Catholic and classical education. After completing his initial studies, John Carroll entered the Jesuit Order in 1753 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1769. He then taught in Flanders, was chaplain to Lord Arundel in England, and then returned to Maryland when the Jesuits were suppressed by Papal Decree in 1773.

Missions in America

Father John Carroll endured much because of the suppression of the Jesuits, feeling that at the age of 40 his life's work had been a failure. However, the suppression turned out to be one of the great blessings for the Catholic ^(CHURCH) in the American Colonies in that it changed the focus of Father Carroll's life.

Upon his return to America, he built ^K a mission church at his mother's house in Rock Creek ^K, Md., to serve the Catholics of the area and also nearby Virginia.

The American Revolution

At the time of the American Revolution, the Carroll Family was large, wealthy, and distinguished. They were also socially and politically active in Maryland and the nearby colonies. They were also passionately interested in freedom! At a time when Catholics were suspect and the victims of prejudice, none would question the patriotism and dedication of the Carrolls.

When American patriots in 1774, the year Father Carroll returned to Maryland, set up a Committee of Correspondence to aid their cause of freedom from England, the Carrolls participated. Two years later, the Continental Congress ^d perused Father Carroll to accompany his cousin Charles Carroll, Benjamin Franklin and others to journey to ^Q Quebec to enlist the help of the French-Canadians in the struggle for ~~independence~~ independence. However, the anti-Catholic prejudice of the colonists, and the Quebec Act granting religious freedom by the British Parliament ^M to all Canadians, doomed the mission to failure.

Fr. Kevin/ Finker's Dam (JOHN CARROLL)/ 4

However, Benjamin Franklin was greatly impressed by Father Carroll's intelligence, sincerity and caring concern, especially when the priest accompanied the aging statesman back to Philadelphia. So impressed by Father Carroll's "friendly assistance and tender care" was Franklin that he would later suggest the priest as the spiritual leader of the Catholics in the new American republic. It was on June 9, 1784 that Father Carroll was chosen as "head of the missions in the provinces... of the United States" by his fellow clergy.

A Great Spiritual Leader

Although the Irish and other Catholics had contributed significantly^{int} to the cause of American Freedom, there was still a residue of anti-Catholic feeling in the new nation. Catholics were less than 1% of the population of some three million. But the personality of Father Carroll, and his family's significant position, were more than ^(HELPFUL) in changing Protestant attitudes. After a visit to Boston, ^W newspaper described him: "As a preacher, his talents^S were admired; as a companion, his society was sought; as a man, he was esteemed."

An accomplished writer, Father Carroll also published letters defending the Catholic Faith. In the Philadelphia "Columbian" of December, 1787, he wrote: "Freedom and independence acquired by the united efforts and cemented with the mingled blood^{id} of Protestant and Catholic fellow citizens should be equally enjoyed by all."