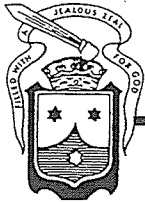


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WE HAVE PLACED OUR HOPE IN THE LIVING GOD. 1 TIMOTHY 4:10b (GN7)

HOW THE IRISH FOUGHT BIGOTRY IN AMERICA

by Fr. Kevin O'Neill Shanley, O.Carm.

A little over a century and three-quarters ago, the great "Irish Liberator" Daniel O'Connell won freedom for his fellow Irish in Ireland with the Catholic Emancipation Bill of 1829 in the British Parliament. Up to that time his fellow Irish Catholics had lived under the dreaded Penal Laws which denied them almost all political and religious rights, not only the right to worship as they wished, but also to own property, vote, or even to educate their children.

Through what he dubbed as the "Catholic Association," O'Connell not only won rights for his fellow Irish but also taught them the art of politics which stood them in good stead not long afterwards in America and the other nations to which they emigrated.

O'Connell was personally devastated by the injustices of the Penal Laws and their expression of prejudice against his people. He fought such prejudice most of his life, not only for the Irish but also for other minority groups.

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"Bigotry," he said, "has no head and cannot think, no heart and cannot feel. When she moves it is in wrath; when she pauses it is amid ruin. Her prayers are curses, her god is a demon, her communion is death, her vengeance is eternity, her decalogue is written in the blood of her victims, and if she stops for a moment in her infernal flights, it is upon a kindred rock to whet her vulture fang for more sanguinary desolation."

And noted Harvard University historian Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., once noted that the prejudice against the Irish and other Catholics is "the deepest held bias in the history of the American people." Both friends and foes of the Irish in America and elsewhere are more than liable to agree, even though some thought that the election of the late President John F. Kennedy was a death knell of such prejudice. The announcement of its demise, however, was quite premature.

Irish in America

Early Irish settlers in America, both Scots Irish and Catholic Irish, often bore a heavy burden of suspicion and prejudice in employment, politics, education, religion and ordinary life. The original Scots Irish who left Ulster because they were discriminated against by the British Government were resented by the Puritans of Boston and New England and moved to Pennsylvania and the Southern colonies.

The Irish, along with many German immigrants bore the great brunt of this bigotry when they fled their native lands to find freedom in America. However, they soon discovered, for example, that the school system was actually a Protestant system. Their children were sometimes physically punished for refusing to attend Protestant prayer services or Bible readings. And when they sent their children to parochial schools, they were still forced to pay for the public system.

Over the decades since then, the Irish and other immigrant groups attempted to enter the mainstream of American culture through a process of assimilation while still retaining their cultural and religious differences. Especially after World War II and the benefits of the G.I. Bill in the U.S. Congress, literally hundreds of thousands of returning veterans were able to obtain a college education and enter fields of new opportunity that were previously denied to them.

Acceptance of Others

The Irish also helped Catholic philosophy and theology to become more accepted in America as witnessed by the greatly popular TV series "Life is Worth Living" by the late Bishop Fulton J. Sheen one of the most well-known Irish Americans. The Irish also entered politics and the professions in ever increasing numbers and paved the way for others, too. Their ability to "share the political pie" with others gave hope to many.

The efforts of the Irish did sustain a set-back in 1928 when Irishman Gov. Al Smith of New York ran for the presidency on the Democratic ticket and raised much anti-Irish and anti-Catholic bigotry. However, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise when the Stock Market "crash" the following year ushered in the Great Depression of the 1930s which was then blamed on Republican Herbert Hoover.

Following the election, Al Smith said, "In this spirit I join with fellow Americans of all creeds in a fervent prayer that never again in this land will any public servant be challenged because of the faith in which he has tried to walk humbly with God."

President Franklin Roosevelt dubbed Al Smith "The Happy Warrior" but it was not until the election of President John F. Kennedy that the Irish could truly feel as though they were finally accepted in America.

They also felt, to a large extent, that they wanted to participate in the Civil Rights Movement to obtain what they considered the rights of all Americans to share in the many benefits available in our land.

The struggle continues to this day but the lessons taught to the Irish so many years ago by Daniel O'Connell still aid in the struggle for equality.