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Irish Frontier Catholicism in the Antebellum US South

Joe Regan

Traditionally, Irish Catholics have featured little in the history of southern religion.¹ The first modern historical analysis of Catholicism in the slave states detailed the Church surviving in an evangelical Protestant monolith by means of cultural confinement. This approach categorized southern Irish Catholics as outsiders, who remained adrift from southern society.² According to the thesis of “cultural captivity,” Irish Catholics assimilated into southern culture by denying their religious sensibilities and developing a standing befitting an immigrant church in the face of Protestant evangelical cultural hegemony.³ Michael O’Brien argues that leading Catholics such as Bishop John England of Charleston were surrounded by a “reflexive hostility” and faced “incessant pressure” to justify their place among southerners.⁴ Randall Miller, a leading scholar of southern Catholicism, suggests that Catholic accommodation within the southern Protestant world order “strengthened a culture” of which Catholics could never “be fully a part.” As a result, according to Miller, southern Catholics “perhaps deservedly, passed into historical obscurity.”⁵

This overly pessimistic view of southern Catholicism fails to acknowledge that Irish Catholics successfully lived by the cultural mandates of the slave states while maintaining their own religious distinctiveness. In the antebellum US South, Catholics experienced “a frontier Catholicism with little in the way of comprehensive ecclesiastical authority or material and monetary resources.”⁶ Michael Pasquier highlights the idea of a “lived religion” to describe the unsettled, unscripted, and unofficial actions taken by the Catholic clergy in the antebellum South “as they attempted to create a settled, scripted, and official Catholic way of life.” European priests found that in many cases it was best to bend the “rigors of ultramontane thinking to make sense of local circumstances in American missions.”⁷ In creating a frontier Catholicism, Irish Catholics lived and socialized with southern Protestants in “a middle ground,” a space of negotiation and assimilation. Southern Catholics and Protestants experienced a shared southern identity based upon the cultural attributes of white supremacy, class, honor, and gender. The South was a “middle ground,” a place and a style of cultural interaction, which allowed Irish immigrants to make sense of and accommodate their differences into a common southern meaning.⁸

Randall Millers and Jon Wakelyn’s edited collection of essays, *Catholics in the Old South* (1983), initiated the modern scholarly study of interpreting Catholicism in the antebellum US South. Modern scholarship on antebellum southern Catholicism, such as James M. Woods’ *A History of the Catholic Church in the American South, 1513-1900* (2011), acknowledged the impact that Irish immigrants had on the institutional development of the Church, but there are few detailed works on the Irish laity in the antebellum US South.⁹ The leading work on the faith of Irish Catholic immigrants in the South remains David Gleeson’s chapter “Keeping the Faith” in *The Irish in the South 1815-1877* (2001).¹⁰ Gleeson explores the important role

that the Irish played in the Church's institutional development and the importance of religion for the laity. He particularly focuses on the urban centers of the South, where the majority of Irish immigrants resided. Southern cities were marked by a greater diversity and religious toleration, but also religious indifference.¹¹ While the majority of Irish Catholic immigrants settled in urban areas, those who established themselves in the rural South were also important for the Church as they were on the frontier of antebellum Catholicism.

The urban experience of Irish Catholicism has long overshadowed the history of those who established themselves in the rural South. Rural Catholics were not a numerically significant force and have received limited scholarly attention. Randall Miller stated that rural Catholics "limped through the nineteenth century in an appalling state of religious stagnation and declension." Catholic group consciousness in the rural south was limited to "the Creole free people of color and the Acadians (or Cajuns) of Louisiana," who were "forgotten people" and remained peripheral to the main developments and experiences of the southern Catholic Church.¹² Such interpretations fail to examine the many factors and regional differences that influenced the practice of southern frontier Catholicism and the role Irish immigrants had in its development. To illustrate the significance of the Irish presence in rural Catholicism, this essay examines the struggles of Irish Catholics who lived isolated lives in the rural South and the important impact the Church had on their lives, by easing their acceptance into southern society. Hostility between native Protestants and Catholic immigrants has been the dominant theme in the historiography of antebellum American Catholicism.¹³ Jon Gjerde successfully argues that the large numbers of Catholic immigrants arriving from post-Napoleonic Europe exposed contradictions between the presumptions about the Protestant underpinning of the American republic and Americans' commitment to religious freedom.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Irish Catholics lived and socialized with southern Protestants. They did not strive to be marginalized outsiders. Andrew Stern has successfully demonstrated that cooperation and tolerance, more than violence and animosity, marked Catholic-Protestant relations in the slave states. The Catholic Church strove to integrate into southern society so that its members were not marginalized.¹⁵ This article builds on Stern's ecumenical approach to southern Catholicism by examining specifically how Irish immigrants practiced their faith and assimilated into southern society.

In the South, the Catholic Church gave many Irish immigrants a welcome sense of familiarity in a strange new land, where slavery was the economic, social, and political foundation. The clergy were essential to the development of the southern Church. Intellectual and pious priests earned the respect of their Protestant contemporaries and helped ease the assimilation of Catholic immigrants. Catholic institutions such as schools and hospitals not only benefited Irish immigrants, but southern society as a whole. However, religious toleration had its limits. The racial etiquette of the antebellum South had to be reverently respected by Catholics. Materials examined for this article relate to Irish Catholics in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The experience in each of these states differed from region to region; however, an underpinning common experience can be seen as representative of the overall Catholic experience in the slave South. This article will further enhance the

understanding of how “in the most isolated of circumstances” Irish Catholic immigrants could remain devoted to their faith.¹⁶

Many Irish immigrants sought refuge in prayer and religion, and both proved a comfort to many in the antebellum US South. The Catholic Church helped Irish Catholic immigrants maintain a core element of their self-identity. The observations and celebrations of Catholicism formed a vital element of immigrants’ social lives. The celebration of mass was a communal activity that transcended socio-economic class lines and reinforced ethnic awareness.¹⁷ However, the Church in the antebellum South was poor and structurally weak. Bishops were continuously faced with the problem of being short of priests to administer their dioceses. Bishop John England found his Diocese of Charleston to be the largest and poorest of any diocese in the US.¹⁸ In 1820, the Diocese of Charleston embraced an area of 127,500 square miles, and upon his arrival England found “five priests, of whom only three had jurisdiction.”¹⁹ In a report to the Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda, England acknowledged that any Catholic who arrived before American Independence could scarcely find a priest, and as a result their descendants were lost to the Church and belonged “to the various sects whose members are four times more numerous than those who now profess the Catholic religion.” Bishop England believed that the poverty of the Church drove many “who wished to maintain a certain dignified position in society” to abandon the Church.²⁰

It is important to state that the extraordinary religious devotion associated with Irish Catholicism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries emerged as a post-Great Famine phenomenon. Before the famine, Irish Catholics were accustomed to a lack of priests and insufficient church institutions due to the poverty and volume of the laity. The practice of “stations” was widespread in Ireland, where priests said mass and heard confession in the homes of the laity.²¹ The Church hierarchy disdained the unstructured nature of the Irish Catholic Church and the prevalence within it of old religious and heterodox custom.²² For example, in 1843, Archbishop Giovanni Brunelli, the Propaganda Fide Secretary, received a report on the Irish Church that found the “ignorance of the people in matters of Religion frightful, and in particular, that the doctrine of the Trinity is rarely known or ever heard of among them.”²³ For those who migrated to the slave states of the antebellum US, the use of rural homes, tents, and crude log-built chapels was sufficient for religious practice. Irish immigrants quickly adapted to the frontier and voluntaristic nature of southern Catholicism.

Irish immigrants, of various denominations, found comfort and refuge in their religion from the hardships of daily life. Michael O’Regan, as he prepared to embark for New Orleans in 1842, consoled his mother, “Religion is now your only consolation—it is what keeps my mind at ease.”²⁴ Many immigrants relied on the solace of religion as a means of overcoming their sense of isolation. On arrival in New Orleans, Hugh Quin was delighted to have “the happiniss [*sic*] of hearing Mass. How happy is a Catholic in every Country! The same Mass the same sacraments. I actually felt at home once more.”²⁵ New England governess Emily Burke noted in Savannah that many of the Irish attended “mass” daily and that “high mass” was attended “as often as it occurs. Many will rise early, and take a long walk in the morning for the purpose of crossing themselves with holy water.”²⁶ Many immigrants relied on the

comfort of religion as a means to overcome their sense of isolation. Patrick Murphy, for example, was an immigrant and building contractor in Natchez, Mississippi. He kept detailed diaries of his experiences, revealing a man who felt isolated, depressed, and homesick. Murphy dreamed of being on board “a ship sailing home” only to wake up alone: “it is miserable to live in such a world.”²⁷ On October 9, 1858, Murphy travelled to Port Gibson for mass for the first time since January 1854.²⁸ Murphy became more attentive to religious practice, but his mind remained troubled and “loaded with anguish...God have pity on me holy virgan [*sic*] pray for me.”²⁹

Most Catholic Irish immigrants found themselves without access to their denomination’s churches in the rural South. John Connolly was the overseer at Woodlands Plantation in Cass County, Georgia. Connolly informed his employer that his marriage “shall be celebrated by a priest & not until then, I consider a magistrate’s marriage very binding but I will in the name of God wait until the nuptial knot is bound by a Catholic Priest.”³⁰ The distance between laity and clergy was identified by Fr. James Hason as “Our Greatest difficulty in Georgia.” Catholics were “much scattered. This causes a great deal of travelling.”³¹ Irish priest Bernard O’Reilly, in Macon, Georgia, was taken aback by “the apathy and indifference which possess some people once they are removed from the influence of religion.” He realized the difficulty faced by those Catholics who wished to practice their faith: “Sunday comes, and there is no church, no priest, no sacrifice.”³² The tyranny of distance and the lack of clergymen posed constant problems for churches in the rural South. When the Diocese of Natchez was established in 1837, only two priests operated in all of Mississippi.³³ The Mother Superior of the Daughters of the Cross mission to Louisiana, Sister Mary Hyacinth Le Connat, believed that not all rural Catholics were “idolaters and heretics,” but that they were “simply indifferent.” She noted that many people lived a life without religion.³⁴

Employment opportunities on internal improvement projects such as canal and railroad construction attracted thousands of Irish Catholics into the rural heartlands of the South. In 1852, for instance, Fr. J. Frérabras notified Bishop Blanc of the construction of a railroad that was under contract by a Catholic, Mr. Crump. The line being built was between Port Gibson and Grand Gulf, and Crump planned to “employ about 150 Irishmen.” Frérabras hoped “therefore, that a goodly number of Catholic families will come at this time to settle...it will not be inappropriate that I be present, at or at a short distance from the construction area in event of illness or accident.”³⁵ Irish laborers were employed to undertake strenuous and hazardous construction jobs. In 1854, for example, Michael Conner was buried in Savannah after being killed working on a railroad; he had been “only 3 weeks in [the] US.”³⁶

Toiling under the unforgiving southern sun and climate, Irish laborers and their families were anxious to have the services of a priest. Fr. Charles Chambost, in Jackson, Louisiana, was “kept very busy about two chantiers [French for construction sites] of Irishmen[,] one at fifteen miles from Jackson and the other at twenty five. Everyone of them has wanted to perform his jubele [*sic*], so I have been bound to visit them several times.”³⁷ In 1857, Fr. R.P. O’Neill travelled twice to Bayou Sara, “where a number of Irish laborers made their Easter.” He discovered on his travels through rural Louisiana a number of Catholics who were “much

dissatisfied, having no opportunity of receiving the sacraments.”³⁸ In Baton Rouge, Fr. Peter McLaughlin requested pastoral leave from his parish in order to travel and “hear confessions indiscriminately among all Leveers & Ditchers.” McLaughlin discovered that to hear confessions “in one shanty & not in another, injures me. People are suspicious,” but he believed that “good work could be done among the poor Irish on Plantations were a priest to attend them in good faith.”³⁹ On large construction projects, immigrant Catholic laborers had a better chance of being visited by a priest. In South Carolina, the arrival of “five hundred people of all ages” on the Stump Mountain railroad made the construction site “numerically the most important point” of Fr. Jeremiah Joseph O’Connell’s entire mission. O’Connell immediately set about organizing a resident priest for Stump Mountain.⁴⁰ However, those working on small projects in the rural South were often isolated from all contact with the Catholic Church.

Most people in the rural antebellum US South attended the church nearest to them, even if they did not belong to that church. The major Christian denominations in the antebellum South were the Methodists and Baptists. During the early decades of the nineteenth century, a massive outpouring of evangelical religious enthusiasm overtook the US.⁴¹ Many Irish immigrants, regardless of their background, were swept up in the emotionalism of evangelical revivalism. Methodists and Baptists adopted an anti-aristocratic bias and gave individuals greater control over their religious lives, which led people to reject traditional distinctions that had set apart the clergy and laity.⁴² For many Irish immigrants, Catholicism and Presbyterianism were more a lingering memory of home than an active faith. Evangelical preaching proved attractive, since it rejected “the appeal to reason and restrained sensibilities for a direct, psychological assault on sin and the equally direct and much more comforting offer of personal salvation.”⁴³ Attending Evangelical services helped ease the assimilation of immigrants into the local community.

A key attraction was the emergence of camp meetings throughout the South. These religious meetings could last for several days, making it worthwhile for isolated rural inhabitants to attend. At these meetings, certain participants, under the power of God, in displays of what came to be called “acrobatic Christianity,” and fallen sinners could raise cries of anguish—“Jesus! Jesus!” or “Oh! I am a sinner!”—as they awaited salvation from the heavens.⁴⁴ In 1827, Juliana Margaret Courtney Conner travelled to visit her husband’s Irish father, James Conner, at his plantation in Mecklenburg county in North Carolina, where a camp meeting occurred nearby with “persons from 20 to 30 miles encamped” for the gathering. Juliana attended the meeting: “A feeling of devotion I will candidly confess, was not my motive for attending.” She was intrigued by the performance of the preacher, though she found the content of the sermon to be “nonsense.” The sole aim of the preacher was “to make the people groan, and the intonation, rise and fall of his voice and almost crying manner produced what words alone had failed to effect.” Juliana had “various fears for their lungs if not their souls.” Camp meetings were not just places of religious worship; they provided a place for people to conduct business: “the candidates electioneered and the belles and beaux displayed their beauty and gallantry.”⁴⁵

It is important to stress that the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening did not carry all in its path and the evangelical church struggled for many decades to prosper among white southerners.⁴⁶ Only one in four adults was a member of a church in the southern states by 1860.⁴⁷ In the antebellum US South, some people were devout Christians, others were indifferent, while many found themselves somewhere in between. Recently arrived, Hugh Quin believed, “New Orleans cannot boast much of piety.” He was disappointed to find that only at funerals did people seem to occasionally receive communion at the altar:

even these few are constantly annoyed in this Church by young, impudent American clerks who strut up and down with their hats on during divine service their hands in their pockets and gazing or staring every female in the face. Sometimes they are so wicked as to nail the ladies gowns to the floor whilst they are on their knees praying to their God.⁴⁸

Irish immigrant Arthur Brown found New Orleans a “horrible place” where the people “laugh at religion.”⁴⁹ Maine-born Joseph Holt Ingraham discovered that “the Sabbath was made for man—not man for the Sabbath” in New Orleans and that “religion was bestowed upon man, not to lessen, but to augment his happiness.”⁵⁰ Throughout the antebellum US South, a sense of ecumenism prevailed, and people often attended the religious services of many different denominations.

Many churches, especially in rural areas, often lacked regular clergymen and welcomed travelling preachers to avail of their church building. People of different denominations attended the same church, and the values of different denominations were exposed to a greater part of the community. Bishop John England often preached in court houses and was invited to preach in various Protestant churches. England’s promotion of religious tolerance made him popular throughout his diocese. He had learned in Ireland that, “by sectarian hatred were the hopes of a nation destroyed.” England asserted, “Persecution makes hypocrites; to hate a person even for infidelity is a crime against charity, and to grasp the sword and punish for unbelief is to usurp the seat of the judging Son of Man.”⁵¹ The small number of Catholics made it easier for them to be tolerated. In Savannah, Fr. P.F. Hooke was delighted to find “very little prejudice” manifested towards him, and he found that the clergy were able “to wear our clerical dress with as much impunity as you can in the city of Dublin.”⁵² Yet, anti-Catholic sentiments were held by many southerners against a religion deemed “stagnant and death-dealing in an age of enlightenment and progress—aside from the great stream of Christian civilization and social elevation.”⁵³

After his initial arrival in Charleston, Bishop England quickly embarked on a tour of his vast diocese. By July 12, 1821, he had reached Murfreesboro in Hertford County, North Carolina, where he found three Catholics, “two of whom were in the habit of attending the meetings of the Methodists and Baptists.”⁵⁴ One of these Catholics was a native of Clonmel, Co. Tipperary, Dr. Thomas O’Dwyer. O’Dwyer regularly attended Methodist, Baptist, and Quaker services, and he was active in the local Bible society. Despite being an isolated Catholic, O’Dwyer maintained his Catholic faith, as revealed in his diary entries that marked observations of Holy days, such as, “This being Ash Wednesday dined on a Biscuit with an Egg.”⁵⁵ On March 19, 1825, Mr Daug, a member of the Bible Society, visited O’Dwyer.

They discussed matters of religion, and the Irish doctor was asked on what he founded his hopes of salvation. O'Dwyer informed his guest that his hopes were founded on

a belief in Christ as our Redeemer and in attending to the religious duties of the Roman Catholic Society in which myself and ancestry have been educated, the orthodoxy of which I have no reason to doubt and that I have only to regret I am not a better Roman Catholic. Still I hope I shall not be a bigoted one, as I pray that all who are sincerely seeking the truth will find it and be saved ultimately.⁵⁶

Having informed his guest of his religious position, he lent him a couple of copies of the *Catholic Miscellany*, the official newspaper of the Diocese of Charleston. Through Catholic newspapers, rural Irish immigrants were informed of ongoing developments in the US Catholic Church, as well as events back home in Ireland. The political exploits of Daniel O'Connell commanded considerable attention in American newspapers and captured the imagination of many. On November 19, 1843, William Johnson, a free African American and respected barber of Natchez recorded in his diary, "Daniel O. Connell is reported to have been arrested in Ireland—treason or Something Like it." In Natchez, travelers could find the "Steam Boat Danial [*sic*] O'Connell" and the race horse "Danl. O'Connell" named after the Irish political reformer.⁵⁷

Between 1823 and 1845, a new popular pride in Catholicism began to emerge in Ireland as a result of the political agitation of Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Association and Father Mathew's temperance crusade. However, it is important to state that many of those who immigrated during and immediately after the famine were not devout Catholics.⁵⁸ Many carried ill feelings towards the Church and were not afraid to criticize the Church and its clergy. John Maginnis, in New Orleans, for example, had nothing but "my wholesale denunciations" for "the clerical stipendiaries [*sic*] of the British crown, who lent their influence to crush the rising spirit of freedom in Ireland."⁵⁹ Many Irish nationalists were bitter towards the Irish Catholic hierarchy for their role in undermining the Young Irelanders revolt in 1848. *The Daily Orleanian*, among other papers, stressed that Irish Catholics were not mere "vassals to priestly authority."⁶⁰ The main obligation defining a practicing Catholic in pre-famine Ireland was not regular attendance of mass on Sundays and obligatory holy days, but fulfilling one's Easter duty. This involved annually going to confession and receiving communion between Ash Wednesday and Ascension Thursday.⁶¹ It is not surprising, then, that many rural Irish Catholic immigrants attended and partook in services of the varying Protestant denominations in the South during the antebellum period.

Frontier Irish Catholics such as Dr. Thomas O'Dwyer never felt they were compromising their faith by attending different churches. For O'Dwyer, attending various preacher sermons provided him with a social outlet through which he interacted with the community of Murfreesboro. It would have been easy for him to convert to a different Christian faith. This was the choice made by many, one which worried the hierarchy. Many appealing and attractive alternatives were available for Irish immigrants. For example, *The Charleston Mercury*, in 1860, carried the following advertisement: "The Irish Society, Established A.D. 1818, for the purpose of Promoting the Scriptural Education of the Native Irish, chiefly

through the Medium of their own language” was hosting charity sermons in the Episcopal Churches of St. Paul and St. Michael.⁶² Isolation broke the will of many, as Fr. Bernard O’Reilly reported from Georgia, “While their neighbors are going in little fashionable groups to church, the poor Catholics are forgotten looking and many, not having the fortitude...yield and go off with the crowd.”⁶³ Some Protestants also attended Catholic services and helped build Catholic Churches in the southern states.

Many priests in the South were surprised to find Protestants attending mass. Father Pitrat informed Bishop Blanc about “the Protestants, who in spite of the bad roads come to the mass and to my instructions and lectures” at Milken Bend, Madison Parish, Louisiana.⁶⁴ Given the isolated and rural nature of the Church outside the cities of the South, Protestants often formed the majority of the congregation for visiting priests. Many attended Catholic places of worship out of curiosity, but also as a social outing. Religion in the antebellum South was not just a means of faith but also a source of entertainment. Religious debates and religious services offered diversions to people, especially in rural areas. On Sundays, scattered neighbors had the chance to gather, gossip, trade, court, as well as worship.⁶⁵ Catholicism offered something novel, and many found various aspects of Catholicism appealing. Theodore Clapp, a Presbyterian and later Unitarian minister, often attended High Mass in New Orleans and believed that “there is not on earth another ceremony so august, solemn, and impressive.” Those used to such displays, he feared, must view Protestant worship as “unedifying and even irreverent.”⁶⁶ In 1859, Madame Baptise Lynch of the Ursuline convent in Columbia, South Carolina, informed her brother, the Bishop of Charleston Patrick Lynch, of the Easter celebrations in the convent. Their altar had been beautifully arranged, and “we exposed your precious relic for adoration all day Good Friday,” which attracted a great many persons “both Catholic and Protestant.”⁶⁷ Methodist Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas from Georgia greatly admired the doctrine “which permits one to pray for the repose of the soul of the dead.” She had recurring thoughts regarding the Catholic faith, and “I confess it, I almost find myself believing in the intercession of the saints.”⁶⁸

In the antebellum US South, frontier Catholicism often depended on the material and monetary resources of Protestant Churches. Priests had to adapt to the reality of rural southern religion. Irish priest Timothy Bermingham was aware of this and conducted camp meetings in the Georgia low country. He explained to Dr. Cullen, in the Irish College in Rome, how citizens expressed an anxiety to hear a sermon from a Catholic priest; when no Protestant meeting house could accommodate the gathering, “they went and cut down small trees-covered them with green branches-erected a stand in the center from which I was to preach.” The “woods were alive with travelers...Generals-Magistrates-Squires-Lawyers & Doctors—every manner of man and woman turned out.” Bermingham preached for two hours and “removed, I hope some prejudices.” At another neighborhood an “old Lady declared” that she was happier to have been able to see a Catholic priest than “an elephant.”⁶⁹ Catholicism added an exotic element into the religious world of the antebellum US South. The Lynch family for many years were the only Catholics in Cheraw County in South Carolina. Fr. O’Connell recalled how the Lynchs once received a visitor, a man who had

“walked two miles after a camp-meeting, just to see a Papist and whether he had the veritable ‘hoofs and horns.’”⁷⁰

Communal and religious interaction between rural southern Catholics and Protestants resulted in greater social cordiality between neighbors. As a result, intermarriage between Catholics and Protestants was not uncommon, to the great displeasure of the Catholic hierarchy. The clergy were often in a state of confusion regarding their ability to “perform marriages, inter Catholic et heretics.”⁷¹ The rights of Catholics, who had married Protestants, to receive the sacraments also caused confusion. Bishop Blanc found that he was faced with a considerable increase in mixed marriages and that it was among immigrants, especially Irish and German, that mixed marriages most often occurred: “They are more, generally the Catholic girls who marry Protestant husbands, American or German.”⁷² This reflects later trends among Irish immigrants in the US, where “Irish-born women married non-Irish men more frequently than Irish-born men married non-Irish women.”⁷³ Marriage proved a successful means for many Irish immigrants to climb the social ladder. Fr. O’Connor noted to Bishop Elder how he married a Mr. Noonan to a wealthy lady of “the Lutheran Sect.” “Mr Noonan has sold his business in Canton, and was then on his way to Arkansas to the plantation of his wife where he intends to reside.”⁷⁴ Intermarriage could also arouse great tensions within families. Irish immigrant Patrick Cantwell, who had settled in Charleston, was horrified that his son Edward wanted to marry outside the Catholic Church, and worse, “the young lady” had “no fortune.”⁷⁵ Patrick tried to have the marriage postponed, but was unsuccessful.⁷⁶ Edward married his Methodist fiancé and his father lamented his son’s decision.⁷⁷

Irish immigrant families often faced internal fighting over matters of religion and challenges to traditional parental authority. Patrick Cantwell was a devoted Catholic and feared the temptations available in the US. His letters to his son John in New Orleans continually reminded him of the diligence of hard work and the necessity to adhere to the Catholic faith.⁷⁸ As a father, Patrick wanted his children to be successful and warned John that he “must not think of love or marriage,...lose not your chance then of promotion, by any rash move.”⁷⁹ Parental advice on religious matters was common among Irish immigrants of all denominations. Eleanor Elliott Neely was informed by her mother not to worry about the sickly heat of Charleston, for it was “not as hot as the displeasure of an offended God.” Eleanor’s only hope was to follow “true religion without which there is no real happiness in this world nor in the world to come.”⁸⁰ Many immigrants sought refuge in prayer and placed the hopes of their families in the hands of God: “May almighty God protect you from harm and danger. May the holy Virgin be your protectory.”⁸¹

Efforts to maintain Catholic practices required considerable commitment in the rural South. The few established rural Catholic parishes, typically had only one priest who also had to administer to missions and stations attached to the parish. Catholic priests travelled in the same manner as Protestant revival circuit riders to visit the dispersed rural Catholic population. Often mass was celebrated only once or twice a year in the more remote locations but this kept the faith alive for many throughout the South. The clergy played an important role in the lives of antebellum Catholics; they did more than just act as spiritual leaders; they

often played the role of social workers, educators and health care providers. Especially in urban areas, priests acted as figureheads for newly arrived immigrants. The leadership provided by John England in Charleston strengthened the “veneration for the Religion of my Fathers,” wrote Bernard Maguire, who continued: “my pride as an Irishman, my feelings as a Republican strong in the principles of Democracy and equal rights” were strengthened by the respect and renown the Bishop had gained not just in Charleston but throughout the nation.⁸² Capable and pious priests made a positive impact. Irish priests in particular, championed the cause of the immigrant community. In many cases, Irish immigrants felt more comfortable bringing their grievances to the attention of their priest, rather than directly to the official authorities.

The priest often acted as a leader and representative figure of the poor immigrants in the antebellum towns and cities of the South. In New Orleans, Bishop Blanc received complaints about the actions of the pastor of St. Patrick’s Church Fr. Mullon, who alienated “part of his people” and prejudiced “the minds of protestants.” Mullon was a staunch Irish nationalist and many resented him for “standing forward as the champion of national predilection & antipathies & by his active co-operation & the unnecessary frank avowal of his opinions in all places.”⁸³ As the antebellum period drew to a close, the close relationship between Irish Catholic immigrants and their priests became an increasingly common feature of the Irish immigration experience, particularly in urban areas. Papal emissary Archbishop Gaetano Bedini observed on his 1853 US tour that Irish immigrants “see in their priests not a simple minister of religion but their father, their magistrate, their judge, their king, their ‘papa’, their idol.”⁸⁴ For the poor, working class Irish families, eking out a hard existence, the aid and charity provided by the Catholic Church was indispensable.

The Catholic Church received widespread praise for its work with the poor and the sick. In the South, state governments, for political, demographic, and environmental reasons, were hesitant to build and fund institutions to tackle social problems such as health care and education. The idea of poverty as a problem of individual morality dominated the thinking of the political and upper class of the South, and it was up to charities and philanthropists to try and address pressing social issues.⁸⁵ Catholic schools, hospitals, and orphanages helped fill a void in society, and most southerners were willing to support institutions which benefitted society as a whole.⁸⁶ Fr. Hasson, in a letter to All Hallows College, downplayed the risk to health, hoping to encourage more missionary priests to travel to the slave states. He found that “[t]he colds, the asthmas, and the fevers of Ireland are decidedly more fatal and more unmanageable than the fevers I have seen in the South.”⁸⁷ The reality was, however, that Irish immigrants, especially recently arrived immigrants, were highly susceptible to subtropical diseases, particularly yellow fever. Disease was an ever-present threat in the antebellum South, and outbreaks, even epidemics, of yellow fever, cholera, smallpox and typhoid hung over the South.⁸⁸ Yellow fever earned the nickname of “strangers’ fever,” as recent arrivals were much more prone to the disease than those born in the South.⁸⁹ Many Americans held similar views to Emily Burke, who believed the high mortality rate among the Irish was a result of their attempts “to drown thoughts of disappointment in the intoxicating cup, go to drinking whiskey which causes the climate fever to set in, from which they seldom recover.

Thus ends every year the existences of thousands of these deluded beings.”⁹⁰ A more scientific reason rested in the fact that Irish immigrants had never been exposed to diseases carried by mosquitoes and had no tolerance or any form of inoculation.⁹¹ One recent Irish migrant observed in Louisiana that mosquitoes “breed in millions in stagnant water, are something similar to our midges and their sting is so painful as that of our wasp.”⁹² Thousands perished as victims of the disease-carrying mosquitoes.

The Catholic clergy, when visiting the sick, found that circumstances often required them to perform the role of doctor, particularly in the more isolated rural settlements.⁹³ In 1853, for example, New Orleans was struck with one of the worst yellow fever epidemics, and fifteen members of the clergy lost their lives.⁹⁴ The following year Savannah was severely hit by an epidemic of yellow fever, and Irish Bishop Gartland, struggled to attend to the needs of the city’s Catholics.⁹⁵ The fever of 1854 was one of the worst to ever hit Savannah, and of the 650 fatalities, 293 were Irish born immigrants.⁹⁶ Among the dead was Bishop Gartland. Many of the Catholic clergy were brave and selfless in aiding the sick during epidemics. Increased immigration throughout the antebellum period put severe pressure on the South’s charitable hospitals and orphan asylums. During epidemic outbreaks, these institutions were overwhelmed. The charitable actions of the Catholic Church and their sacrifices made a positive impact on Protestant society.⁹⁷ Few voiced opposition to the creation of Catholic charitable hospitals. Protestant minister Theodore Clapp believed that “the Roman Catholic church is infinitely superior to any Protestant denominations in its provisions of mercy and charity of the poor.”⁹⁸ Praise for Catholic charitable works was widespread, and this helped to foster a more positive feeling towards Catholicism in the slave states.

The little red school house typical of much of the US was not part of the tradition in the rural South, and Vernon Burton has noted that, “The southern aristocrat’s sense of noblesse oblige did not extend to the education of the common people.”⁹⁹ Catholic education made an impact in the slave states where the availability of schools was limited. By providing schools, the Church met a need for the general population. In the antebellum South, a stigma was attached to free schools and Catholic schools offered an alternative. They charged low tuition fees, as wages were not required for the nuns and priests. Catholic schools used the fees from wealthy students to subsidize the fees of the poor. The Church also focused on providing an education which attracted the children of the planter elite and took great measures not to alienate potential Protestant students. The convent schools of the Ursulines and those of the Sacred Heart offered the traditional French elite style boarding schools for girls and had a reputation for teaching elegant manners and good virtues.¹⁰⁰ Andrew Stern has highlighted how these Catholic schools benefitted from the perception of Catholicism “as a refined, aristocratic religion, and from the esteem of some Protestants for European religious orders.”¹⁰¹ Teaching the planter elite’s children helped promote a positive view of Catholic education and religion at a time when an overheated, over suspicious, overaggressive, and paranoid style of American politics established its roots.¹⁰²

In the years between 1830 and 1860, anti-Catholicism in the US became unprecedentedly violent and vocal. Anti-Catholic literature spread like wildfire throughout the US. From 1830

to 1860, 270 books, 25 newspapers, 13 magazines, and multitudes of pamphlets and almanacs were dedicated to the anti-Catholic crusade. One of the key themes common to this emerging literature was the sexual immorality of Catholicism. Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery* (1836) was the most popular and successful book in the US prior to the publication of *Uncle's Tom Cabin* in 1852.¹⁰³ The behavior of some priests in the Antebellum South did little for the reputation of Catholicism. In 1859, Mary Stinson requested a priest to come visit her family at Velasco Plantation in Plaquemine Parish, Louisiana, in hopes to convert her husband to Catholicism. In her request Mary explicitly stated to Bishop Blanc, "[D]o not by any means send [an] Irish Priest it would not do."¹⁰⁴ The US attracted many zealous and pious clergymen, but "others were driven across the Atlantic by disappointment or by censure." Bishop England noted that, "though they rendered occasional services, unfortunately, they too often counterbalanced them by their scandals."¹⁰⁵

In 1834, physical violence against the Catholic Church erupted with the burning of the Ursuline Convent, in Charlestown, Massachusetts, by a mob encouraged by the anti-Catholic preaching of Unitarian minister Lyman Beecher.¹⁰⁶ A year later, armed with "guns and bayonets" from the Irish, "who form one of the voluntary corps in the city militia", Bishop England of Charleston, South Carolina, defended himself and Church property against a mob who desired to march "to the seminary and give me (I live there) the benefit of Lynch's Law, tear down the buildings and the Church &c."¹⁰⁷ Charleston was a city brewing with tension after the heat of the Nullification crisis of 1832.¹⁰⁸ The British Emancipation Act of 1834 was viewed with disgust by planters, and the increased militancy of Northern abolitionists further heightened tensions in the city.¹⁰⁹ Hysteria raged in the summer of 1835 after rumors emerged of a conspiracy on the part of an outlaw, John. A. Murrell, to stir up an insurrection among the slaves.¹¹⁰

On July 29, 1835, the packet ship *Columbia* arrived in Charleston from New York and delivered the mail to the US Post Office. Copies of abolitionist tracts sent by the American Anti-Slavery Society to prominent residents of the city were discovered. That night hundreds of Charlestonians stormed the post office and burned the abolitionist propaganda. Some denounced the city's Catholic bishop, who was believed to hold further offensive literature, and they resolved to march to the Catholic seminary.¹¹¹ The mob never confronted the Bishop and his armed volunteers; yet, it was conspicuous that the seminary was singled out. In 1833, John England had been appointed to serve as the Papal legate to the Republic of Haiti. England's standing in Charleston society suffered a severe blow for this association with the freed slaves of Haiti. England was also responsible for recently introducing orders of nuns into South Carolina. The presence of nuns reminded members of the public of the sacrilegious scandals they had encountered in the popular press. Among the mob of 1835, rumor raged that one of Charleston's nuns was a black woman. In fact, a French order, the Dame de la Retraite, who established a school for the French Catholics of the city, had among them a mulatto woman.¹¹² Many reluctantly accepted the Catholic presence in Charleston, and a growing opinion maintained that the Catholic bishop was transgressing the racial order. Any tampering with the fixed and stern race relations was deemed unacceptable.

The Bishop and his volunteers held their defensive lines for days, and on the “second day several of the most respectable citizens of all religions sent to have their names enrolled on our guard.”¹¹³ On that same day, England sent a letter to the *Charleston Courier* informing his fellow citizens that he was not a recipient of abolitionist literature and stated:

I know no Carolinian who more seriously reprobates the conduct of those men, who by pouring them in upon us, are destroying our peace, and endangering our safety. Nor do I know a single Roman Catholic, clerical or lay, with whom I conversed upon the subject, who is not fully determined to use his best efforts to prevent the mischief of their interference.¹¹⁴

In an attempt to restore public order, a “respectable committee of citizens” requested that the Bishop discontinue all Catholic schools for free blacks. The Bishop agreed as long as “they made the same application to those of other religions who had schools.”¹¹⁵

England moved quickly to recover lost ground and improve his damaged public image. That December, he travelled to the state legislature in Columbia with James Hamilton, Robert Hayne, and James Louis Petigru, three of the leading figures in South Carolina politics. All “were firm friends” of the bishop. England had gone to petition an act of incorporation for the Ursuline convent in Charleston. However, he was denied the privilege to preach before the House of Representatives and found that the politicians were “prejudiced against Convents &c” and that they “wished to show their disapprobation of my going to Hayti.” Through his friends, the Bishop was able to make an appearance before the State Senate, where he recounted the “indignity, injustice and persecution heaped upon Catholics, and the manner in which the Carolinians had been deceived respecting them.” England beseeched them “as they valued their good name, not to degrade Carolina by placing it by the side of Massachusetts.”¹¹⁶ England succeeded in getting the convent incorporated, but also set in motion the rebuilding of his name as a staunch defender of the social order in the Carolinas.

Although southerners could tolerate a religious minority in their midst, they would not tolerate any interference with the institution of slavery and the South’s racial order. Catholics in the South had to tread very carefully regarding slavery if they wanted to be accepted as true southerners. Many priests arriving to the slave states were warned in advance that they must be acquainted with and respect “the manners and usages of the people” of the South. Newly arrived priests had to “be reminded of the local differences, even for the spiritual guidance of both patrons...free and slave.”¹¹⁷ Aware of its fragile position in a Protestant nation, the Catholic Church took great care not to become embroiled in the slavery controversy.¹¹⁸

Religion had the capacity to unite or divide people depending on the time, the place, and the inclination of individuals. Irish Catholics in the slave states endured a hostile climate, where disease was rampant. Poverty and isolation was the reality for many rural southerners. In the towns or remote country settlements southerners required “the support of their neighbors, both as individuals and as groups.”¹¹⁹ This was the case for Irish Catholic immigrants who settled in the rural antebellum South. The relatively small number of Irish Catholic

immigrants and the overriding importance of the defense of slavery allowed Irish Catholics to fit into the regional identity of the slave states, where they gained greater acceptance in society than they did in the North. The success and growth of the Church in the antebellum South rested on its firm commitment to the prevailing social order. The Catholic hierarchy in the US upheld an image of society as organic, corporate, and hierarchical which coincided neatly with the planter-dominated order of the South. Rural Catholics experienced a shared common southern identity which allowed religious individualism. Many southerners would have agreed with the sentiment of Confederate General Pierre Gustave Toutant-Beauregard—a Louisiana-born, Catholic—who in his antebellum days believed that if a man obeyed the Ten Commandments “the matter of his religious affiliation was of small consequence.”¹²⁰ The rural Irish Catholic experience demonstrates that rural southern Catholics did not live necessarily in cultural confinement. Many interacted and participated in local Protestant religious services yet maintained their own personal faith in Catholicism. Despite receiving scarce institutional support, many rural Catholics found solace in their faith and went to great measures to foster and maintain it. The inscriptions of the oldest headstones in Catholic graveyards provide evidence of the importance of religion in their lives. One such example is the headstone of John Fagan, who was born in Co. Wicklow on June 24, 1820, and who died in Mississippi on June 23, 1884. His epitaph reads, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.”¹²¹ Irish Catholics who experienced rural Catholicism adapted to the reality of the southern frontier; they were not outside the main currents of the antebellum southern social experience.

Notes

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⁹⁹ Orville Vernon Burton, *In My Father's House Are Many Mansions: Family & Community in Edgefield, South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University Press of North Carolina, 1985), 80.

¹⁰⁰ Joseph G. Mannard, "Maternity... of the Spirit: Nuns and Domesticity in Antebellum America," *US Catholic Historian* 5 (Summer-Fall, 1986): 305-324 (see 311).

¹⁰¹ Stern, *Southern Crucifix*, 94.

¹⁰² Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in Richard Hofstadter, ed., *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 4; David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic and Anti-Mormon Literature," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47 (September 2, 1960): 205-244 (see 205).

¹⁰³ Ray Allen Billington, "Tentative Bibliography of Anti-Catholic Propaganda in the United States (1800-1860)," *Catholic Historical Review* 18 (January 1933): 492-513; Marie Anne Pagliarini, "The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America," *Religion and Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 9 (Winter 1999): 97-128 (see 99).

¹⁰⁴ Mary Stinson to Bishop Blanc, June 10, 1859, Bishop Blanc Papers University of Notre Dame Collection, AANO.

¹⁰⁵ John England, "Propagation of the Faith in the United States," in Sebastian G. Messmer, ed., *The Works of the Right Reverend John England, First Bishop of Charleston*, vol. IV (Cleveland: Arthur Clark Company, 1908), 284-285; Christopher Stokes, "Catholics in Beulahland: The Church's Encounter with Anti-Catholicism, Nativism, and Anti-Abolitionism in the Carolinas and Georgia, 1820-1845," (PhD diss., Rice University, 2001), 67-68.

¹⁰⁶ Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 135-154.

¹⁰⁷ Bishop England to Dr. Cullen, February 23, 1836, in "Papers Relating to the Church" 8: 218-222.

¹⁰⁸ Lacy K Ford, Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 99-144; Joseph Kelly, *America's Longest Siege*:

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¹⁰⁹ Jannet Duitsman Cornelius, *“When I Can Read My Title Clear”*: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 42-43.

¹¹⁰ For more on Murrell, see Joshua D. Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

¹¹¹ Kelly, *America’s Longest Siege*, 204; Stokes, *Catholics in Beulahland*, 1-24.

¹¹² Kelly, *America’s Longest Siege*, 214-217; Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title*, 42-44.

¹¹³ Bishop England to Dr. Cullen. February 23, 1836, cited in “Papers Relating to the Church,” vol. 8, no. 2: 218-222.

¹¹⁴ *Charleston Courier*, July 30, 1835.

¹¹⁵ Bishop England to Dr. Cullen, February 23, 1836, cited in “Papers Relating to the Church,” vol. 8, no. 221.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 223-224; O’Brien, *Conjectures of Order*, vol. 2, 1091.

¹¹⁷ Archbishop Blanc to Bishop Elder, June 5, 1857, Bishop Elder Letter Book No. 1, 1857, ACDJ.

¹¹⁸ For more on the church and slavery, see Madeleine Hooke Rice, *American Catholic Opinion in the Slavery Controversy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944); Joseph Brokhage, *Francis Patrick Kenrick’s Opinion on Slavery: A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Sacred Theology of the Catholic University of America in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Sacred Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1955); Randall M. Miller, “Slaves and Southern Catholicism,” in John B. Boles, ed., *Masters & Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740-1870* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988); Kenneth J. Zanca, *American Catholics and Slavery, 1789-1866: An Anthology of Primary Documents* (London: University Press of America, 1994); Cyprian Davis, *Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroads Press, 1990); John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003); John F. Quinn, ““Three Cheers for the Abolitionist Pope!”: American Reaction to Gregory XVI’s Condemnation of the Slave Trade, 1840-1860,” *Catholic Historical Review* 90 (January 2004): 67-93; Joseph E. Capizzi, “For What Shall We Repent? Reflections on the American Bishops, Their Teaching, and Slavery in the United States, 1839-1861,” *Theological Studies* 65 (December 2004): 767-791; John T. Noonan Jr., *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); Adam L. Tate, “Confronting Abolitionism”; Wallace, *Catholics, Slaveholders, and the Dilemma of American Evangelicalism*; David C.R. Heisser and Stephen J. White, Sr., *Patrick N. Lynch, 1817-1882: Third Catholic Bishop of Charleston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015).

¹¹⁹ Stern, *Southern Crucifix*, 36-37.

¹²⁰ Cited in Reinders, *End of an Era*, 114.

¹²¹ Paulding, “Inscriptions on Some Tombstones,” *History Notes P*, ACDJ.