

## Catholicism in the United States: The Beginning

This has been a momentous week in the lives of Catholic Americans. On Monday June 29 we celebrated the great feast of the Martyrdom of Sts. Peter and Paul, on Tuesday July 30 we celebrated the feast of the martyrs of Rome and on Saturday July 4 we celebrated the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Each of these celebrations mark the founding of two institutions that are dear to our hearts as Catholic Americans. I think what is interesting is that in both cases blood was shed willingly by men and women for something greater than themselves, for a greater cause, for a greater purpose, and for a better tomorrow for those who would come after them. Both the Church and the United States have had a profound impact upon the world and in all cases regarding the Church and in many cases regarding our nation have made the world a better place to live in. The two men who have most come to my mind are Bishop John Carroll and Mr. Charles Carroll who set the course for the role of American Catholics that we still follow today.

There was a great deal of prejudice in the colonies before and after the Revolution. This prejudice stemmed from a fear that because Catholics had an allegiance to the Holy Father, who was considered a monarch, they could somehow not be real Americans. But if we look at history closely we will see that Catholics were involved from the very beginning with the founding of the American experiment with democracy. The last man to sign the Declaration of Independence was Mr. Charles Carroll. By signing this document he placed his life, his property and his family's welfare in peril, but sign it he did. He was the only Catholic to sign the Declaration of Independence and all Catholics can be proud of his heroic action.

Bishop John Carroll was a relative of Charles Carroll's but at the time of the Revolutionary War he was a priest and former Jesuit. He traveled with Benjamin Franklin on diplomatic missions and the two became friends. It is believed that his influence was important for the addition of religious freedom to the documents that founded our nation. He would go on to become the first American bishop as the first Bishop of Baltimore. Bishop Carroll was quick to defend Catholics in the face of prejudice and religious persecution and stand up for them as true Americans. In a letter in response to a malinger of Catholics dated 10 June, 1789 he stated, "Their blood flowed as freely (in proportion to their numbers) to cement the fabric of independence as that of any of their fellow-citizens. They concurred with perhaps greater unanimity than any other body of men in recommending and promoting that government from whose influence America anticipates all the blessings of justice, peace, plenty, good order, and civil and religious liberty." These were the words of the first American Bishop and it evidences the important role of the Church and her members in the history of our nation.

This weekend we celebrate the birth of our nation and our way of life that has been defended by Catholics along with countless others throughout its history. It is something that every Catholic American can be proud of. As we continue to journey in this third century of our nation's history we all must continue to fulfill our civic duties while remaining faithful to the Church's teachings. We are blessed to have such great examples as Bishop John Carroll and Mr. Charles Carroll but more importantly the nameless, faceless men and women who have helped to make the Church an important part of American life.

Happy Independence Day,

Fr. Long