

# Be proud of the Catholic American legacy



Catholics may feel defensive these days. The current debate about legalized abortion, now under review by the U.S. Supreme Court, and the Catholic Church's longstanding respect for unborn human life, put Catholics on the target board for persons who want abortion on demand.

The clergy sex abuse scandal has humiliated Catholics and reduced regard for the Church.

Amid it all, Catholic Americans should be proud. The Church has stepped forward to help the troubled and the needy in this society, at least as drawn from European roots, since it has existed.

Almost three centuries ago, French nuns arrived in New Orleans, in France's colony of Louisiana, to found what became Charity Hospital, precisely to serve people unable to secure good health care for themselves.

Charity Hospital resulted in a network of top-notch hospitals, all operated under the vision of the Church to resemble Christ in caring for the sick.

In 1990, these hospitals, from Anchorage to Miami, Honolulu to Boston, provided health care to over 20% of America's seriously ill or injured, regardless of a patient's race, creed, color, economic status or gender.

As time passed, the Church organized schools, even to the university level, to equip the young for wholesome and productive adulthoods, refreshed by a knowledge of, and familiarity with, the Lord.

Thus began the University of Notre Dame, Fordham, Santa Clara, Marquette and dozens of other outstanding schools. Fine elementary and secondary schools also dotted the landscape.

Since the Mexican War, Catholic priests have eagerly provided spiritual comfort to soldiers and sailors as chaplains.

Several of these priests were so heroic in pursuing their vocations that they now are being considered for canonization, such as Maryknoll Father Vincent Capodanno and Father Emil Kapaun, of the Wichita diocese, both of whom served and died in more recent wars.

A century ago, great numbers of immigrants, almost suddenly, came to this country. The Church was on the spot, meeting their needs. Mother St. Frances Cabrini, who especially was interested in immigrants, is a shining example.

Slavery ended in 1866, but African-Americans hardly all at once were accepted in this society or able to find the way to security and respectability.

Mother St. Katherine Drexel, the Josephite Fathers, the priests of the Divine Word and others came forward, and they made a mighty difference.

Supreme Court Associate Justice Clarence Thomas attributes his success in reaching the pinnacle of the law profession to the nuns who taught him.

American leaders, and laws, and certainly many customs, as often as not, historically were unfriendly to Catholicism, but in response, the Church called for loyalty to the country and for active involvement in its interests.

Precisely for this purpose, Blessed Father Michael McGivney formed the Knights of Columbus.

High tide of ill feelings for Catholics on the part of many others in the United States occurred in 1960 when Senator John

F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, a professed Roman Catholic, was the Democratic Party's nominee for president.

Sam Rayburn, from rural Texas, a fundamentalist Protestant, then one of this country's most prominent and most powerful politicians, was Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Mail, hostile to Kennedy because of Kennedy's religion, literally tumbled into Rayburn's office. The speaker answered these letters, saying that during his decades in Congress, he had served with very many Catholics, and not one among them, Democrat or Republican, was lacking an iota in love for this country, its people, or in support of its Constitution. He also noted the many Catholics who willingly gave their lives in the Second World War and in Korea in defense of the United States.

This great legacy still lives. Look at Catholic Charities across the country. Look at Catholic facilities for today's immigrants. Listen to the bishops' appeals for better lives for all Americans, schools, and most of all, look at devoted Americans who are good Catholics. Be proud.

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