



American Catholic History
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George Washington, Catholic?

Ever since he died, there has been speculation that George Washington converted to Catholicism on his deathbed. Part of the reason why some think our first President did so is related to the attitudes and actions in his life that were favorable toward Catholics.

Throughout his public life, Washington was known to be more favorably disposed toward Catholics than was usual for a man of his social standing. Many of the officers he relied upon most closely during the Revolutionary War were themselves Catholic, including the Marquis de Lafayette, who was almost like a son. He almost put an end to anti-Catholic customs, like Pope Night, among his soldiers, calling the demonstrations idiotic.

He attended Mass on a number of occasions at St. Mary's in Philadelphia over the years, as a sign of acceptance of religious plurality in America. He would later write a letter to Charles Carroll--the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence--and his brother who become American's first bishop, John Carroll of his hope that Americans would not forget the vital role that Catholics played in independence. A letter to a Jewish congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1790 of the right to religious liberty now enjoyed by all Americans.

Washington was also known for his generosity toward the construction of several Catholic Churches in Philadelphia; Alexandria, Virginia; and Baltimore. In addition, it is known that he kept a painting of the Immaculate Conception in his private room in Philadelphia and that he crossed himself before prayers.

But it was in 1799, after ending his service as President, as Washington lay dying at Mount Vernon that he called for Jesuit Father Leonard Neale to be with him at his deathbed. Fr. Neale stayed by Washington's bedside for four hours before his death.

While none of that constitutes definitive evidence of conversion, it paints an interesting portrait of the tolerant and pious man that was George Washington.

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John Fitzgerald

When George Washington led the Continental Army as its commander during the Revolutionary War, he relied on a couple of dozen young officers as his aides-de-camp, soldiers who he could trust implicitly with the most sensitive matters. Among them was a Catholic Irishman named John Fitzgerald.

Fitzgerald had emigrated to Alexandria, Virginia, by the end of the 1760s and began a successful mercantile business that allowed him to rise in Virginia society and become friends with Washington. After the war began in 1775, while Washington took command of the Continental Army in Boston, Fitzgerald was commissioned a captain in the 3rd Virginia Regiment. But soon after, Washington needed an aide-de-camp and called on his old friend, John Fitzgerald.

The group of aides was often referred to as Washington's "family" and Fitzgerald traveled with the family from March, 1776 through the battles of Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, and Germantown into late 1777. He was then dispatched to Virginia while the army wintered at Valley Forge, and that was fortunate because Fitzgerald got wind of a plot to undermine Washington's support in the Continental Congress and have him replaced as Command in Chief. His timely information allowed Washington to quash the incipient uprising and remain in command.

Fitzgerald was later wounded in battle in June 1778 and returned home, where he resumed his business interests after the war, got married to a nice Catholic girl of a prominent family in Maryland, just across the Potomac from Mount Vernon.

Washington and Fitzgerald remained close friends for years after and it was on St. Patrick's Day in 1788, during a dinner that Washington attended at Fitzgerald's home that Fitzgerald began soliciting funds for the building of the first Catholic church in Virginia. According to legend, Washington made a financial contribution to its construction. That church is the Basilica of St. Mary.

Washington and Fitzgerald died within two weeks of each other in December 1799 and their long enduring friendship was a testament to both men to see above prejudices, like the anti-Catholicism of the day, not just to accomplish great deeds, but to show evidence of Christian brotherhood and love.

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Ben Franklin and Bishop John Carroll

How did Founding Father Ben Franklin—who was decidedly not Catholic—come to play a role in the selection of the first Catholic bishop in the United States?

It all began in February 1776 when Franklin, Charles Carroll, and Samuel Chase were dispatched by the Continental Congress to Canada to convince them to join the 13 American colonies in rebellion against the British Crown. Franklin was fluent in French and a noted diplomat, Carroll was a wealthy Catholic who spoke French, and Chase was a Protestant who represented heavily Catholic Maryland. And accompanying them on their long, arduous journey from Philadelphia to Québec and Montreal was Carroll's cousin, John, a Jesuit priest.

Unfortunately, the Canadians treated the American delegation with suspicion and as traitors. The Bishop of Québec even forbade all priests and religious from even speaking to Fr. Carroll. To make it worse, the elderly Franklin became very ill during the trip, even fearing he wouldn't survive, and so he had to return home. Fr. Carroll accompanied him on the return trip, providing compassionate care the whole way.

Years later, after independence had been won, Pope Pius VI had an American problem, namely that Catholics in the new nation were still under the ecclesiastical authority of the Catholic bishop in London and thus they needed their own leadership. By this time, Franklin was the ambassador from the US to France and so he was approached by the papal nuncio for his opinion of any suitable candidates to become the first bishop of the United States.

Franklin spoke glowingly of Fr. Carroll, who nursed him back to health, and advanced his name as the right man for the job, which impressed the nuncio, and so in 1789, Pope Pius named John Carroll the first bishop of Baltimore with authority over Catholics in the whole United States of America.

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Commodore John Barry

John Barry is known as the Father of the US Navy, who was responsible for many of the Continental Navy's first warships; commanded the ships in the first and final naval battles of the Revolutionary War; and was the first commissioned officer of the US Navy. He was also Catholic.

Barry was born in 1745 in County Wexford, Ireland, and went to sea at age 10, settling in Philadelphia as his homeport at age 15. By 21, he was captain of merchant ship making regular runs to the West Indies. In Philadelphia, he could also live out his faith at the only two Catholic parishes in the English-speaking world where Mass could legally be celebrated in public at the time.

When the Revolutionary War began in 1775, Barry sold his merchant ship to the Continental Congress, which converted it to a warship. Barry was made a captain in the

new navy and tasked without fitting the new ships of war. Soon after, he had won his first naval battle, capturing the British sloop Edward off Virginia. After, Barry became a Marine for a time, fighting at the Battles of Trenton and Princeton. He even refused a large monetary offer by the British to turn traitor to the cause.

Returning to sea in 1781, Barry commanded the frigate Alliance to two victories, including one in which he was severely wounded, but nevertheless refused to surrender.

After the war, Barry returned to merchant sailing for a time, until George Washington asked him to become the first commissioned officer of the new US Navy, being made a commodore and thus the first flag officer. He would oversee the construction of the Navy's first frigates and recommended that the Department of the Navy be established separate from the Department of War.

John Barry is remembered in the Chapel of the US Naval Academy, where his Bible now rests upon the altar in tribute to his dedication of life to God and his country.

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Fr. Pierre Gibault & Francis Vigo

The Revolutionary War wasn't just confined to the 13 colonies on the Atlantic seaboard, but extended inland all the way to the settlements on the Mississippi River. General George Rogers Clark was the American soldier in charge of the campaign in the west. That included the settlements at Kaskasia, Cahokia, and Vincennes, all former French Catholic towns now controlled by the British.

Fr. Pierre Gibault was a Montreal-born priest who had been stationed in Vincennes (Indiana) and then Kaskasia (Illinois) starting in 1768 and was much-beloved throughout the region. Given Father's reputation and connections, Gen. Clark made the area his home base of operations and resupply. Given their former mistreatment by the British, the French Catholics welcomed the Americans' tolerance of their religion and antipathy for their oppressors.

Fr. Gibault even went as an emissary to other towns in the region to plead the case of religious and political freedom promised by Clark, allowing the Americans to take Cahokia, Vincennes, and even the British Fort Sackville without firing a shot. That left Detroit in Clark's crosshairs.

That's where Francis Vigo comes in. Vigo was born in Italy and had become a successful fur trader in the region based out of St. Louis, which was owned by Spain at this time. He traveled extensively in the area and had developed sympathy for the American cause. Connecting with Clark, he became the most important financier and source of supplies for the campaign. He also worked as a spy for the Americans until he was caught by the British, who had recently retaken Vincennes and Fort Sackville.

That would have been the end for Vigo except for the intervention of Fr. Gibault and the people of Vincennes who promised to cut off all supplies to the British garrison if they did not release him. The British made Vigo promise he would return to St. Louis without telling anything to Clark. Which he did. Then he left St. Louis and went straight to Clark. That resulted in a massive victory for Clark, Fr. Gibault became known as the Patriot Priest, and since then they have long been remembered together in that region.

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