

Bicentennial exhibit highlights growth of the Catholic Church in America

In the expansive landscape of religious freedom in the United States following independence, the vigorous spread of Catholicism can be witnessed in original letters and documents now on display in a special exhibit commemorating the 200th anniversary of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Primary among the documents displayed as part of “From Diocese to Archdiocese: Baltimore 1808” in Laubacher Hall at St. Mary’s Seminary and University in Roland Park are papal bulls of 1808 authorizing the establishment of Baltimore as an archdiocese. They also authorize the creation of four new dioceses in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Bardstown (now Louisville, Kentucky). Also included are the papal bulls appointing bishops to those dioceses: Bishop John Cheverus for Boston; Bishop Richard Luke Concanen, O.P., for New York; Bishop Michael Egan, O.S.F., for Philadelphia; and Bishop Benedict Flaget, S.S., for Bardstown.

Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien welcomed a crowd of more than 180 for the exhibit’s opening April 12.

Referring to the hand-penned papers and portrait drawings arranged in the display cases, Archbishop O’Brien said the collection represents the significant growth of the Catholic Church over the years. “It offers us an opportunity to reflect on the perseverance and the sacrifices evidenced by those who have gone before us, who tried to live their lives as conscientious Catholics and loyal American citizens,” he said.

“Baltimore has a prominent and unique place in the history of the American Catholic church and of America,” Archbishop O’Brien stated. “We here are so fortunate because we can go just about anywhere and see churches and monuments that remind us of the important role that connects us to the church beyond the borders of this archdiocese.”

Befitting an event that celebrates the church's growth and development, the audience for the exhibit's opening was largely made up of confirmation candidates and their families from Immaculate Conception Church in Towson, who were making a pilgrimage to St. Mary's Seminary as part of their sacramental preparation. Also attending were members of the deacon formation program at St. Mary's, including Jim Barth, accompanied by his wife, Kay. "I knew Baltimore was the first diocese," said Mrs. Barth after examining the display, "but I didn't realize Baltimore oversaw the whole country."

As described in a visitor handout prepared by archdiocesan archivist Dr. Tricia Pyne, Baltimore's boundaries when it was established in 1789 as the nation's first diocese were those of the entire United States. At the time, Catholics made up only 1 percent of the U.S. population, residing mostly in Pennsylvania and Maryland. Twenty years later, however, growing numbers of immigrants from Europe and the Caribbean were settling in all parts of the country, including the frontier. The number of Catholics in Maryland and the District of Columbia had nearly doubled, straining the resources of the 30 priests serving them, most of whom had come here as missionaries from Europe.

Bishop Carroll, assisted by his coadjutor and eventual successor Bishop Leonard Neale, found it increasingly challenging to meet the needs of such a diverse and dispersed flock, so he appealed to Rome for help. The subsequent apportionment of the U.S. Church into five jurisdictions with their own bishops allowed for more personal stewardship, even though the new Archdiocese of Baltimore would sweep south from Maryland all the way west to the Mississippi River, encompassing the District of Columbia, Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi.

In her remarks at the exhibit's opening, Dr. Pyne highlighted another dimension of the growing Catholic presence in America by pointing out the inclusion of letters relating to women's religious communities active in the archdiocese during that time. These include the Discalced Carmelites who established a monastery at Port Tobacco in Charles County in 1790, the Pious Ladies of Georgetown (later affiliated with the Visitation Nuns) who ran schools for young women and African Americans, and the Sisters of St. Joseph (now Daughters of Charity) founded by St. Elizabeth

Ann Seton, a young widow who would have remembered 1808 as the year she arrived in Baltimore with her five children and opened her first school.

Correspondence relating to the delivery of the papal bulls, also displayed in the exhibit, tells a dramatic story of its own. "The Pastoral of the Bishops of 1810," another item on display, is the published version of regulations concerning the laity which, together with previous diocesan legislation from 1791, would serve as formative statutes of the U.S. Church for nearly 20 years.

"From Diocese to Archdiocese: Baltimore 1808" is open to the public Monday-Thursday 4:00-6:00 p.m. through May 1.