

Catholic Review Column: Pope Francis and John Carroll

Aug. 15 marked the 225th anniversary of the consecration of the first bishop of Baltimore and the first Catholic bishop of the United States, John Carroll.

We owe much to Archbishop Carroll, whose consecration occurred a full nine months after he was appointed bishop of Baltimore. The ceremony took place in the chapel of the Weld family at Lulworth Castle in Dorset, England, where Charles Plowden, a friend of the new bishop, served as chaplain. I was blessed to be able to visit Lulworth Castle in 2014, the first known visit of any of Bishop Carroll's successors. (That was on my bucket list!)

The anniversary of his elevation to the episcopacy is an opportunity for us to reflect on the man and the many contributions he made to the Catholic Church in Baltimore and the United States.

Born in Upper Marlboro, in Prince George's County, Jan. 8, 1735, John was the fourth of seven children of Daniel Carroll and Eleanor Darnall. He attended a Jesuit grammar school in Cecil County and St. Omer's College in France for six years. (By a happy coincidence, I will be hosting a delegation from Saint-Omer at the Basilica of the Assumption Aug. 21. I look forward to greeting them some 250 years after John Carroll first began studies there.)

After the death of his father in 1750, John joined the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) and was ordained to the priesthood at the age of 34 in 1761. When the Society was suppressed by Pope Clement XIV two years into his priesthood, John returned to Maryland to live with his mother at Rock Creek. Due to the anti-Catholic laws of the time, he was forced to celebrate the Holy Mass in a small chapel on the property of his mother's home.

In a development that would have significant ramifications for his future, Carroll accompanied Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Chase and his cousin, Charles Carroll, on a mission to Canada. Following the failed mission, in which they sought to persuade

Canada to support the Americans in their revolt against England, Father Carroll returned to Philadelphia to care for Franklin, who had fallen ill. This kindness is said to have led Franklin to recommend Carroll in response to a Vatican inquiry as to who should become the first bishop of the U.S.

A supporter of the cause for independence and the freedom it would mean for Catholics and others of religious faith, Carroll wrote to a friend soon after freedom from the English was ratified by treaty in 1783: "Our religious system has undergone a revolution, if possible, more extraordinary than our political one." Understanding the challenges ahead, he added, it was "a blessing and advantage, which is our duty to preserve and improve with utmost prudence."

And preserve and improve it he did. Three years later, he was appointed bishop of Baltimore. Among his first acts as the new Catholic bishop in the fledgling nation, he appealed to Congress for constitutional protection of religious liberty.

The bishop was also integral to the establishment of schools - Catholic and non-Catholic - serving as president of the Female Humane Charity School of the City of Baltimore, one of three trustees for St. John's College in Annapolis, founder of Georgetown College (later University) and president of the trustees of Baltimore College.

John Carroll also invited the Sulpicians to come to Baltimore from France and form the first U.S. seminary, St. Mary's, and encouraged Elizabeth Seton, the future saint, to establish the Sisters of Charity for the education of young girls.

So respected was Bishop Carroll, he was chosen in a unanimous vote of Congress and clergy of all denominations and congregations of Christians throughout the U.S. to preach a eulogy for President George Washington at St. Peter's Pro-Cathedral in Baltimore.

In 1808, when Baltimore was elevated to an archdiocese and new dioceses were created in New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Bardstown, Ky., John Carroll became an archbishop. Just before his death, some seven years after his elevation, he said, "Of those things that give me most consolation at the present moment, one is that I have always been attached to the practice of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary;

that I have established it among the people under my care, and placed my diocese under her protection.”

The cathedral church in Baltimore that he commissioned for the archdiocese and the church in the U.S. would be complete six years after his death and was consecrated to the same Blessed Mother to whom he was so devoted.

Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, who assists the Vatican with the English-speaking media and who serves as CEO of Salt and Light Catholic Television Network, said of the first Jesuit pope’s visit to the U.S., “When (Pope Francis) visits the United States in September 2015, it will be a cause for rejoicing and a moment of gratitude that Ignatius’ vision and Pope Francis’ Petrine and Ignatian Ministry have found a home in the United States of America from the very beginnings of this great nation.”