

French symposium focuses on religious freedom

SAINT-OMER, France - In the 1500s, anti-Catholicism became popular in England, with the Act of Supremacy in 1535, which declared that the crown of England was the only head on earth of the church in England, instead of the pope.

The College of English Jesuits was established in the small French town of Saint-Omer in 1593 as a boarding school for Catholic families that could not practice their faith in England and Ireland.

A century later, Maryland was established as a colony in America, as a planned haven for Catholics who faced persecution in England and Ireland.

With the repeal of the Tolerance Act in 1654, it became difficult or impossible for Catholics in the colonies to worship or gain education.

As had their English counterparts in the 1500s, Marylanders in the 1700s turned to Saint-Omer to form their sons in a classical Catholic education.

A Maryland delegation joined hundreds of others in Saint-Omer Oct. 14-15 to mark 275 years since the arrival of Daniel Carroll at the College of English Jesuits, followed six years later by his brother, John, and cousin, Charles.

Daniel Carroll of Rock Creek, born in 1730, was one of only five people who signed both the Articles of Confederation and the U.S. Constitution. He first arrived at the College of English Jesuits in 1742 and studied there for six years.

Inspired by the Jesuits teaching at the school, John Carroll (b. 1735) joined the

order, became a priest, and eventually was named the first bishop in the United States in 1789 when the Diocese of Baltimore covered the original 13 colonies. Charles Carroll of Carrollton (b. 1737) was the only Catholic to sign the Declaration of Independence.

The question of religious freedom received special attention during a weekend of events in Saint-Omer in mid-October as the town officially reopened the newly renovated Chapel of the Jesuits. It has not been used for worship for more than 125 years, and was inaugurated Oct. 14 as a multimodal arts and performing space for the town.

At the opening ceremony, Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori, 15th successor of Archbishop John Carroll, acknowledged the hardship that led families to send their sons to the school.

“As subjects of the British Empire in the 18th century, they were not free to practice their Catholic faith,” he said. “Among the laws enacted to suppress the Catholic Church during this period was one that prohibited Catholic schools. It’s for this reason that families such as the Carrolls made the sacrifice of sending their children abroad for their education.”

At an Oct. 15 roundtable on “Culture and Interreligious Dialogue: 300 Years of Tradition,” Archbishop Lori joined other faith leaders, to discuss the state of religious liberty now, compared to the past.

In his remarks, the archbishop noted that “religion and religious practice, while still considerable, exert less influence than formerly on how people comprehend and analyze the social issues of the day.” Where the parish or local congregation once was the worship, educational and social hub of life for people, that has changed as new ways of communicating and entertaining largely focus on the individual.

He said that it matters whether religious organizations can be involved in the moral issues of the day.

“Should not churches and people of faith feel secure in a nation that proclaims our fundamental freedoms to be from God, not the state, and that it is the duty of the state to protect and foster those freedoms?” the archbishop asked. “As I see it, the answer to that question is complex. On the one hand, a change in morals or a breakdown of a moral consensus affects laws, policies and court decisions – all of which reflect societal trends. On the other, constitutional guarantees may help moderate such trends, for law is an arbiter of culture.”

He also noted, “In this time of rapid cultural change, religious freedom finds itself competing on a par or at a disadvantage with new rights and freedoms.”

Archbishop Lori said he was describing “a gradual process of secularization in American culture. In and of itself, of course, secularity is not a bad thing. It signifies that which is not divine; the world of time, not of eternity; a sphere of rightful autonomy from religion and the Church – but not of morality.”

Citing “*Gaudium et Spes*,” the 1965 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the archbishop noted the church recognizes the value of secularity. However, he added, “what seems to be taking hold in some quarters, however, is not healthy secularity but rather various forms of godless intolerance – whether it is, for example intolerant atheism, or a secularism that is intolerant of religious beliefs, or political philosophies that rule out consideration of truth and goodness.”

He said, “For much of U.S. history, the First Amendment to the Constitution was seen as a way of protecting religion from the overreach of the government. Since the late 1940s, the First Amendment has been consistently interpreted as a way of excluding religion from the counsels of government and especially from any form of

government support for ministries like education.”

That has led some politicians to try to narrow the definition of religious liberty to include only worship, not the other works of churches, such as Catholic Charities. The best response to such challenges, Archbishop Lori believes, is “to stay engaged - with patience, intelligence, and love - to study and pray, but also to build bridges, even consensus wherever possible.”

Such an approach allows the church to “defend religious freedom mainly by evangelizing more effectively, while discerning carefully what battles have to be fought in the here and now.”

Franck Aubert, a Muslim from the Saint-Omer area, participated in the roundtable, discussing local interreligious cooperation. Speaking in French, with English translation provided, he said, “You can only be a true believer when you love your neighbor as yourself.” He said an interreligious group of faith leaders meets six or seven times a year to plan “moments of commonality” including meals, social events and prayer.

“A principle of a free society is to allow people to believe in God or not,” not to suppress believers, Aubert said.

“This requires an open spirit. There is no dialogue without listening to each other.”

Pierre Cazier, a Catholic who participates in the Saint-Omer interreligious group, said that after the slaying in 2016 of Father Jacques Hamel in his church near Rouen by two men claiming allegiance to the Islamic State, local Muslims asked how they could join in prayer with the Catholic community.

“The Catholic community was very touched by their presence. All of these events could have kept us closed in on ourselves, but it drew us closer together,” Cazier

said.

Blandine Kriegel, a retired philosophy professor, facilitated part of the roundtable. She noted that the separation of the spiritual and secular seems to be happening more often throughout Europe. She cited two English saints, Thomas à Becket and Thomas More, who “lost their lives for spiritual independence.”

Nearly three centuries ago, trained at Saint-Omer, the Carrolls brought these ideals to a new nation. “What do we owe the Jesuit schools in France?” Kriegel asked. “We owe them the courage of being responsible.”

Bishop Jean-Paul Jaeger of Arras, Boulogne and Saint-Omer, joked that it is sometimes easier to understand the mystery of the Holy Trinity than to understand the mystery of secularism.

Religious leaders in France were not guillotined because they were more pious than the rest of the population, but because the political leaders of the time were trying to “suppress a certain way of thinking,” the bishop said.

In an interview with the Catholic Review, Maryland Lt. Gov. Boyd Rutherford also reflected on the question of religious liberty that drove the Carrolls to send their sons to France, noting that in the United States, “we grapple now with the balance between religious freedom and freedom from religion.”

The Carrolls and other Catholic families could not practice their religion freely, or educate freely in their faith.

“I think it’s important that when we have this discussion of freedom – freedom of religion, freedom from religion, the separation of government and religion – that we keep in mind that we don’t want to stop people from practicing,” Rutherford said.

When the government starts putting restrictions on the practice of the faith, he said, it is good to keep in mind “why we have the Constitution and the amendments and the sacrifices of the Carroll family,” he said.

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