

***The Plenary Councils of Baltimore (1852-1884):
The Formation of America's Catholic School System Amidst Anti-Catholicism in the United States***

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*“Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”
~ Northwest Ordinance, Article III 1787¹*

This famous quote reflects the importance Americans placed on religion in schools, and established the foundation upon which education systems functioned for over a hundred years. But, as Catholic immigration rose rapidly during the mid-nineteenth century, religion became a highly contentious issue. Increasing tensions between Catholics and Protestants eventually contributed to the need for a series of national conferences for Catholic leaders to determine the future of the Church. These conferences, called the Plenary Councils, were national in scope and took place in Baltimore in 1852, 1866, and 1884. Unlike previous provincial councils, which were held at the diocesan level, the Plenary Council were called for by a consensus among American bishops with permission from the Vatican. Each council established a stronger hierarchy and reflected the increasing importance placed on Catholic education. By the end of the third council in 1884, the Catholic school system became a powerful component of American education, absorbing a substantial portion of the nation's surging Catholic population. Initially spawned from the urgency that resulted from increasingly strong anti-Catholic sentiments in American society, the three Plenary Councils strengthened both religious schools and Catholic perceptions of the importance of religious education. Through their decrees on education and

¹ United States Congress, “The Northwest Ordinance, July 13th, 1787,” in *The School in the United States: A Documentary History*, ed. James W. Fraser (New York: Routledge, 2010), 41.

support of their goals by the Church's adherents, the Plenary Councils of Baltimore created the modern parochial school system, which became the strongest private school network in the United States.

This paper examines the historical context through which each Plenary Council was convened, and traces the impact of each Council's decrees on the progress of Catholic education in the United States. It draws a corollary between the progression of the anti-Catholic movements in America and the frequency of the plenary meetings, indicating that anti-Catholic sentiments contributed to the convocation of the American Catholic hierarchy. This paper also argues the significance of anti-Catholicism in the subsequent creation of the Catholic school system.

Historical Context

The history of the Catholic Church in the United States dates back to the voyages of Christopher Columbus, when it was very regionalized due to the different nations under which it grew. French, Spanish, and British colonizers established settlements in present-day America and Catholicism grew in those controlled by France and Spain. The first British colonies and settlements in America were Protestant in religious affiliation, and therefore did not face the problem of Catholics, with whom they had bitterly split during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Maryland was the first British colony that even permitted the practice of Catholicism, and was founded in 1634 by Cecilius Calvert or "Lord Baltimore." Being a Catholic, Lord Baltimore protected the religious freedoms of those fleeing the persecution of the British crown, including those affiliated with the Church. Plagued with issues such as the Protestant Reformation, Vatican officials were preoccupied with maintaining their religious interests in Europe, so Catholic parishes developed slowly in the colonies. Likewise, parochial

schools experienced a very slow emergence, even in Maryland. In the mid-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Jesuit brothers opened and operated short-lived schools in Maryland, which closed due to a lack of demand.²

While Catholic education was off to a rocky start in Maryland, the British colonies' only religiously tolerant settlement, it was non-existent in other colonies. In fact, the development of schools in general was a tedious process that evolved from the demands for religious instruction by Puritan community leaders. In Massachusetts, for example, the "Old Deluder Satan Law" in 1647 mandated that every township with fifty or more households "appoint one within their town to teach all...children as shall resort to him to write and read, whose wages shall be paid either by the parents or masters of such children, or by the inhabitants in general by way of supply."³ It was through this law that the first publicly funded schools in the United States were established, though only to serve as a vehicle to religious development for children. For the next 150 years, public schools were created when deemed appropriate by local authorities, and would remain religiously influenced by Protestant denominations. While there were some Catholic schools in this mix, they varied locally and also faced the prospect of Protestant influence. As a whole, Catholicism was a very regionalized religion that had little potential to succeed under the existing repression by Protestants.

By the time of the American Revolution, Catholicism in the colonies remained weak. Repression through the form of anti-Catholic legislation that forbade the practice of Catholicism had been passed in every colony at some point during the 17th and 18th centuries. Even Maryland fell to the influence of Protestants, who battled politically with the colonial government and

² National Catholic Educators' Association, "A Brief Overview of Catholic Schools in America," <http://www.ncea.org/about/historicaloverviewofCatholicschoolsinamerica.asp> (accessed November 15, 2011).

³ "Massachusetts Old Deluder Satan Law, 1647," in *The School in the United States: a Documentary History*, ed. James W. Fraser (New York: Routledge, 2010), 8.

passed control between Puritan and Catholic sects.⁴ Religious tolerance was eventually reestablished and stabilized in Maryland and other colonies by the time the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776, and it was fully expanded to all colonies with the United States Constitution's Bill of Rights in 1791. During the Revolutionary War, however, the entire American Catholic population had only 24 priests to service the roughly 24,000 Catholics, who represented less than .01% of the over 2.5 million inhabitants of the original thirteen colonies.⁵ In 1767, the colonies saw the first official Catholic grade school, St. Mary's, which opened in Philadelphia and would set the standard for parochial education to come.

Although they constituted a considerable minority of the population at the time of the Constitution's adoption in 1788, eager Catholic clergy opened new churches and looked to the model of St. Mary's to expand the presence of the Church in its followers' lives. With the recent break from England, and a break from the original dioceses responsible for overseeing Catholics in America, churches in the newly formed United States answered directly to the Vatican. Without an overarching regional authority, most pastors operated their parishes under their own interpretation of Papal decrees and policies. It was not until 1789, one year later, that the Vatican erected the first diocese in America, at the request of American priests. The Diocese of Baltimore, located in the first state to have been founded on religious freedom, was created for its first Bishop, Rev. John Carroll. Construction on the country's first Catholic college, Georgetown Academy, began the same year, expanding Catholic education from elementary grade schools to institutions of higher education. In 1791, Bishop Carroll held the First National Synod, or assembly of the clergy, with the permission of the Holy See (the Vatican) to address

⁴ William Russell, "Archdiocese of Baltimore," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Vol. 2 (New York: Robert Appleton Company 1907), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02228a.htm> (accessed November 15, 2011).

⁵ Father John Carroll, "Report for the Eminent Cardinal Antonelli Concerning the State of Religion in the United States of America," in *Documents of American Catholic History*, ed. John Tracy Ellis (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1956), 152-154.

the state of the American Catholic Church and bring unity to the highly regionalized sections of its constituency.⁶ By this time, Catholics had been in the New World for over 150 years. The slow development of the Church to this point had provided little need for strong Catholic education, considering that common schools promoted religious values, albeit Protestant ones.

Along with the gradual emergence of the Catholic Church, common, or public, schools were constructed across the United States during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The public school system was becoming progressively bigger and more uniform throughout this expansion. Unfortunately for Catholics, the creation of an official diocese, or “episcopal see,” and its subsequent work at unifying the regionalized Catholic population in the United States, prevented the Church from focusing more heavily on the formation of its own religious schools. Though the national hierarchy (then only the Archdiocese of Baltimore) was unable to implement a wide-scale call for parochial education, local churches were unrestrained from initiating their own schools. In New York, which would later have one of the best-established Catholic school systems in the nation, the “Common School Fund [in 1795]...provided for public funds to denominational charity schools,” including Catholic schools.⁷ This is evidence that not only did local parishes create parochial schools independently during this time, they were also able to successfully secure public funds for them. New York did not end this program until 1824, almost 30 years after it began.

Through expanding the newly unified hierarchy, or Catholic governmental structure, several other episcopal sees were created in 1808, in places like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. The creation of these dioceses led to the promotion of the Diocese of Baltimore to

⁶ Peter Guilday, *A History of the Councils of Baltimore* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1932), 60-71.

⁷ William W. Brickman, “Historical Background for Freedom in American Education,” in *Educational Freedom and the Case for Government Aid to Students in Independent Schools*, eds. Daniel D. McGarry and Leo Ward (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1966), 13.

an Archdiocese, or “metropolitan see,” which gave the Archbishop supervisory authority over its surrounding dioceses, or province.⁸ Under this authority, the First Provincial Council was held in 1829 in Baltimore. The Council, the first of seven, was intended to once again establish a uniform canonical doctrine for Church discipline during a period of American and Catholic expansion. The decrees from this council held significant importance in American Catholic history, providing the first official call of the hierarchy for the establishment of more parochial schools. Flooded with “inaccurate knowledge on Catholicism,” such as usage of the term *popery*, Protestant-run common schools were causing Catholic children to fall from their faith. The Fathers decreed that they “judge[d] it absolutely necessary that schools be established in which the young may be taught the principles of faith and morality, while being instructed in letters.”⁹ The urgency placed on this decree was not as pronounced as in later councils, as the religious values espoused by the common schools were still sufficient enough to provide Catholics with an education grounded in religious ideology.

By the mid-nineteenth century, American education was changing as a result of the common school movement. Under the heavy influence of Horace Mann, an education reformer and later Massachusetts politician, common schools became more than educational outlets for religious literacy. As he stated in his tenth annual report to the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1846, “it seems clear that the minimum of this education can never be less than such as is sufficient to qualify each citizen for the civil and social duties he will be called to discharge.”¹⁰ Mann, along with other reformers, promoted the common school as the basic inculcator of civic responsibility in a republic. With the incorporation of democratic ideals into

⁸ Russell, “Archdiocese of Baltimore” (accessed November 15, 2011).

⁹ Guilday, 94-95.

¹⁰ Horace Mann, “Tenth Annual Report to the Massachusetts Board of Education, 1846,” in *The School in the United States: a Documentary History*, ed. James W. Fraser (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 49.

the schooling system, many Americans became wary of the Catholic hierarchy's role in education. Because of their history with the Catholic Church during the Reformation, most Protestants feared strong Catholic control of any area of society, and the idea of Catholic schools training children in their practices for participation in a democratic society likewise threatened Protestants' vision of American liberty. Compounded with local attempts to secure public funding for private education, as in New York, Protestant politicians and civic leaders helped foster significant anti-Catholic ideology. Anti-Catholic rhetoric then found its way into the common schools, escalating the division between Catholic and public education.

A group of Catholics in New York in 1840, appalled at the transformation of the common schools, petitioned the school board to reinstate public funding. They cited the anti-Catholic rhetoric employed by Protestants as a security mechanism against the growing influences of the Catholic Church. Usage of the terms "popery" and "deceitful Catholics" angered Catholic parents and church leaders, who saw increased disobedience at home from their children. They made claims that their children were "imbued with the same principle [of anti-Catholicism]...unwilling to learn anything of religion."¹¹ Further complicating the relationship between Protestant community leaders and Catholics was an expanding Catholic population. Growing mostly through increasing immigration from Catholic Ireland, among other countries, the Church witnessed a significant rise in its constituency in the mid-nineteenth century. James Fraser, an educational historian, noted that increased Irish Catholic immigration caused "violent clashes...between poor and working-class Protestants and Catholics," and that English-origin elites recognized that "Catholic immigrants could provide low-cost workers who could fuel an economic upsurge." The goal of Protestants, much to the opposition of the Catholic Church, was

¹¹ Catholics of the City of New York, "Petition of the Catholics of New York for a Portion of the Common School Fund: To the Honorable Board of Aldermen of the City of New York, 1840," in *The School in the United States: a Documentary History*, ed. James W. Fraser (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010) 68-73.

to “‘Americanize’ [Catholic immigrants], which meant ‘Protestantizing’ them to the greatest degree possible” through common schools and the usage of the Protestant Bible.¹² These were deliberate attempts by Protestants to “cleanse” their communities of Catholic influence.

Near the halfway marker of the nineteenth century, the power of the American Catholic Church had been split between several dioceses and newly promoted archdioceses, such as the Archdiocese of New York in 1842. Until that time, the Archdiocese of Baltimore had acted as the nation’s Catholic leader. As a metropolitan see, or archdiocese, Baltimore had ecclesiastical power over every suffragan, or subordinate, diocese in its province. Without any other archdioceses in the nation, Baltimore was the de facto leader of the American Catholic Church. As larger suffragan dioceses were promoted to the status of metropolitan sees, therefore receiving their own provinces to govern, the Archdiocese of Baltimore lost its status as the national leader of Catholics. A side effect of this change was the implementation of the decrees issued at the Provincial Councils of Baltimore. With new metropolitan sees, free to make their own provincial rules, Baltimore’s decrees no longer applied to the entire Catholic population of the United States. The division of authority among several American provinces would set the stage for the First Plenary Council of Baltimore, which was the first that would apply its decrees to every metropolitan see in the nation. It would also establish the first national push for a system of Catholic education as an alternative to public schooling.

The First Plenary Council of Baltimore, 1852

By 1852, there were “six metropolitan sees [archdioceses]...[and to] these were subject in provincial affairs twenty-six suffragan dioceses and two vicariates-apostolic,” and each of

¹² James W. Fraser, *The School in the United States: a Documentary History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 47.

these metropolitan sees were responsible for governing their own provinces separately.¹³ The Catholic population of the United States had experienced unprecedented expansion between 1830 and 1850, which led to the increase in suffragan and metropolitan sees. At the beginning of the Catholic hierarchy in the United States, there were 24,000 Catholics living in America, representing less than .01% of the total population. By 1850, there were just fewer than 1.1 million, an increase of over 450%, which then comprised about 5% of the American population.¹⁴ The substantial majority of this increase came through the form of immigration from Ireland (among other countries), where drought and famine caused a mass influx to the United States. In 1840, 600,000 immigrants arrived at the U.S., but in 1850, there were 1.7 million.¹⁵ Though not all immigrants were Catholic, such a drastic increase in the immigrant population throughout this time period led to overinflated estimations of the number of Catholics living in the United States, as many people equated Irish immigration with Catholicism. *The American Almanac*, in 1826, reported there being 1,071,000 Catholics in America; even a Catholic Bishop, Reverend John England, in 1836 guessed that there were 1.2 million American Catholics.¹⁶ These incorrect reports heightened American fears of Catholic hierarchy, which further fueled anti-Catholic rhetoric that was already being promulgated throughout common schools and Protestant services.

With hostilities increasing toward the newly arrived Catholics, archbishops across the nation recognized the need to hold a national conference to establish uniform canon law and reactive policies, which led to the First Plenary Council of Baltimore. Granted permission by the Holy See in 1851, the First Plenary Council was conducted under Archbishop Francis Kenrick

¹³ Guilday, 167-183.

¹⁴ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 118-122.

¹⁵ Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 67-83.

¹⁶ Finke and Stark, 117-188.

with a total attendance of 41 arch and suffragan bishops in the spring of 1852.¹⁷ The purpose of the council was to not only to agree on policymaking among the differing metropolitan sees, but also to apply the decrees from the seven Provincial Councils of Baltimore to the national arena. Among these decrees, evident in the first and fourth councils specifically, were calls for the creation of Catholic parish schools, as well as for pastors “to see that those frequenting public school do not use the Protestant version of the Bible or sing sectarian hymns...[and that they] employ their influence against the introduction of such practices in to the public schools.”¹⁸ Tremendous hostility between the Church and Protestants developed from the views of religion in common schools, which were only exacerbated by this decree, calling for parish priests to openly engage in resisting the usage of the Protestant Bible in schools.

Protestant fears of Catholicism were widely expressed through the “Americanization,” or at the time, “Protestantization,” of Catholics. Especially prevalent in public schools where Protestant leaders worked to eliminate the faith of Catholic children, it was not surprising that Catholic leaders would react negatively. The biggest threat to Catholic leaders and parents alike was a loss of faith, or defection, from the Church. Because of the inflated estimates of how many Catholics were living in America at the time, there were great concerns among Church leaders over what they presumed to be high rates of defection. Given low mass attendance in comparison to the *supposed* number of Catholics in the United States, it was easy to make the mistake of miscalculating a precise rate of desertion.¹⁹ As public schools continued to cleanse their communities of Catholic practices and traditions, Church leaders became more hostile toward government-funded education. New York Archbishop John Hughes, one of the strongest

¹⁷ Guilday, 170-175.

¹⁸ William Fanning, “Provincial Councils of Baltimore,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02239a.htm> (accessed November 14, 2011).

¹⁹ Finke and Stark, 118-120.

proponents of Catholic education, declared in a speech to his congregation that “the benefits of public education are not for us,” addressing the general mentality of Catholic leaders at the time.²⁰ Though it was certainly true that public schools could suffice for predominantly Catholic communities, who would control the local public schools and their curriculum, this did not apply to most Catholics, and education remained a big issue for bishops attending the First Plenary Council.

The Council met in Baltimore in the spring of 1852 to address the concerns of the Catholic community regarding the state of education and assimilation into American culture, among other issues. Upon receiving approval of the decrees from Pope Pious IX in September of the same year, the Archbishop of Baltimore immediately published them, and they took the full effect of Catholic law. Included in these decrees was the expected nationalization of the Provincial Councils’ decrees regarding education. The thirteenth decree directly addressed the role of the Church in education, and declared “bishops are exhorted to have a Catholic school in every parish and the teachers should be paid from the parochial funds.”²¹ To be sure that the children attending these schools would receive the maximum possible education, bishops were further recommended to “begin these schools whenever possible in their dioceses, since Catholic boys and girls are in grave danger in educational institutions which are not directed by [Catholic] religious motives.”²² It was through this Council that the first attempts at a nationally organized parochial school system emerged. Parochial schooling had already been well represented in areas such as New York City and Philadelphia, yet the decrees of this council prompted these large areas to incorporate their parish-run schools into a district-like organization, resulting in

²⁰ Finke and Stark, 147.

²¹ William Fanning, “Plenary Councils of Baltimore,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02235a.htm> (accessed November 14, 2011).

²² Guilday, 179.

private school systems. St. John Neumann, consecrated as Bishop of Philadelphia in the same year as the first Council, was the first American bishop to organize an official diocese-sponsored school system. Under his leadership, Philadelphia again became the leader of Catholic education in the United States.²³

The First Plenary Council was significant in the history of American Catholic education in three ways. First, it was the primary attempt at unifying existing Catholic schools and establishing more to service the children who were viewed as “falling from the faith.” It was the fear of losing their young, whose spiritual growth was being stunted by Protestant indoctrination in public schools, which prompted Catholic leaders to dedicate the second congregation of the Council to a discussion on the “problem of Catholic elementary schools.”²⁴ Secondly, the council’s decrees reflected a nation-wide interest in Catholic education by both Church leaders and Catholic adherents. These sentiments would grow stronger between the first and second councils. Lastly, the Council induced a negative visceral reaction among Protestants that had already feared the establishment of a Catholic hierarchy in the United States. Fearful of what they perceived as an anti-Democratic organization controlled by the Pope, citizens angered by the national regulations governing the American Catholic Church undertook a series of violent protests across the country. Focusing on the largest Catholic provinces, mainly New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, America would soon see a bloody turn in the anti-Catholic movements, leading to destruction of property, personal injury, and death.

The Second Plenary Council of Baltimore, 1866

²³ “St. John Neumann,” in *St. John Neumann Catholic Society*, <http://www.saintjn.org/sjn.php> (accessed November 14, 2011).

²⁴ Guilday, 175.

Following the First Plenary Council of Baltimore came the official boom of the common school movement in the United States. Still regional in nature, the common schools were quickly developing into formalized systems of public education. During the 1840s, school attendance in New England was documented near 80% of all children aged 5-19.²⁵ As part of the growing common school movement, and partly a reaction to the decrees on education from the first council, came the idea of compulsory education. First passed in Massachusetts in 1852, compulsory education laws mandated that “every person who shall have any child under his control, between the ages of eight and fourteen years, shall send such child to some public school within the town or city in which he resides, during as least twelve weeks.” Though the Massachusetts law permitted children to satisfy the requirements of the law through approved private schools, few immigrants could afford them, which essentially forced their children to attend public schools. Further exacerbating the dismay of Catholic leaders and parents was Massachusetts’s 1855 law requiring compulsory reading of the Bible, or more specifically, the Protestant Bible.²⁶ Such mandates, though generally implemented at the local level, were widespread throughout the United States, and caused Catholics to further desire their removal from public schooling.

Attempting to remove themselves from public education entirely, Catholics in the different provinces petitioned their local governments and state legislatures for money from the public school funds. Catholics attempted to secure public funding for private schools in Detroit and Wisconsin, among other places, in the years immediately following the First Plenary Council.²⁷ Archbishop Hughes, of New York, was one of the biggest advocates of securing

²⁵ Maris A. Vinovskis, “Antebellum Common Schools” (lecture presented in “The History of Education,” at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, September 19, 2011).

²⁶ Brickman, 15-16.

²⁷ Brickman, 16.

public funding for Catholic schools. The father of the Catholic school system in New York, Hughes was a passionate defender of the rights of Catholic immigrant populations in general, and was renowned for his development of parochial schools. Though his attempts to regain the public funding lost in the 1820's for his parochial schools were unsuccessful, he was fruitful in petitioning the governor, William Seward, for permission on behalf of all Catholic children to "read from the Douay [Catholic] Bible instead of the King James Bible."²⁸

Hughes' success in securing better conditions for Catholic children in public schools between the first and second Plenary Councils again brought about a negative reaction from Protestants across the United States. Reacting to both the advancement of Catholic education and the Catholic religion in general, Protestant groups contributed to the rise of the American Republican Party, originally organized as the Native American Party but most popularly known as the Know Nothing Party. Given its nickname due to the secrecy of its leadership, the Know Nothing Party was dedicated to suppressing immigration and naturalization. Formally organized in 1852, the Know Nothings sought to block immigrants and non-Protestants from gaining any sort of public office or position of power. This was achieved through intimidation tactics that aimed to prevent Catholics from voting. Successful in elections throughout the nation, the Know Nothings were able to send a large number of representatives to Washington D.C., even as many as seventy-five U.S. Representatives in 1855.²⁹

A large part of the party's goal to restrain Catholicism in the United States was accomplished through legislative reform. At the local level, laws were passed that targeted churches in specific ways. For example, Massachusetts passed a law that attempted to strip

²⁸ Julie Kern, "The Catholic Issue," *The University of Notre Dame*, <http://www.nd.edu/~rbarger/www7/Catholic.html> (accessed November 19, 2011).

²⁹ Peter Condon, "Knownothingism," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08677a.htm> (accessed November 20, 2011).

Catholic churches' titles to their land.³⁰ It was through the legal process that the Know Nothings achieved their goals peacefully, yet that was not always the case—the Know Nothing Party was famous for their physical repression of Catholics, Catholic churches, and anyone associated with them. Violence against Catholics was first documented in the early nineteenth century, with the burning of a convent in Massachusetts in 1834 by a Native American Party mob.³¹ This was the first of many attacks on religious properties throughout America, and mob mentality ruled the party's major actions through its demise in 1860. In 1844, a series of riots known as the Nativist Riots broke out in Philadelphia. Sparked by a run-in between Nativist Party members in an Irish neighborhood and local inhabitants, these riots lasted several days in May and July. Ended by local law enforcement and the Pennsylvania militia, the riots left hundreds dead or wounded, and two churches and dozens of Catholic homes burned.³² This was the first large-scale attack on Catholics during this movement, and it set the standard for later encounters between Catholics and Know Nothings.

Subsequent attacks occurred in Massachusetts and Ohio, where two churches were blown up, and in Louisville, where the “Bloody Monday” riots of 1855 left over 100 dead, and in New York City, to name a few.³³ Innocent bystanders were often killed during these attacks, and even the clergy was not immune. In 1854, a visiting priest to Maine, Father John Bapst, was dragged from his residence, tarred and feathered, and paraded around the town.³⁴ The heinous crimes committed against the Church were epitomized in an 1858 letter to the Holy See, in which Archbishop Hughes had noted that even non-Catholic immigrants openly proclaimed “that there was no hope of freedom for the down trodden people of Europe until the Catholic Church and its

³⁰ Kern (accessed November 20, 2011).

³¹ Kern (accessed November 20, 2011).

³² Kern (accessed November 20, 2011).

³³ Kern (accessed November 20, 2011).

³⁴ Guilday, 187.

clergy, from the Pope downwards, should be overthrown, and if necessary, annihilated.”³⁵

Acting to protect their churches and followers from the violence of the Know Nothings, Catholic priests and bishops retaliated through defensive – and armed – measures. Archbishop Hughes coordinated and armed over 1,000 Irishmen with rifles to defend Old St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City, and successfully diverted violence against the diocese’s mainstay church.³⁶

Armed defenses were also coordinated under Father John Patrick Dunn in Philadelphia during the Nativist Riots in 1844, as well as in Rhode Island under Bishop O’Reilly in an 1851 attempt to destroy a convent and church rectory.³⁷ With armed defense led by members of the clergy, it was clear that the tensions between Catholics and Protestants had hit an all-time high.

Compulsory education (though infrequently enforced), the expansion of public schools, legal attacks on Church property, and heinous violence against the Church all contributed to the convening of the Second Plenary Council. In addition to the immediate concerns of safety and the American hierarchy’s future, the end of the American Civil War was a significant part of the discussion. By its close in 1865, the Civil War had shattered the once unified United States, and left considerable political tensions between the northern and southern parts of the nation. Looking to avoid further attack by taking sides in the war on slavery and secession, the American Catholic Church abstained from involvement in the Civil War. The period of new national direction in the U.S. prompted Catholic leaders to hold the second council so that they could accommodate their principles and messages to the changing times. They also had the prospect of incorporating the four million newly freed Negroes into the Church, who were free to

³⁵ Archbishop John Hughes, “Archbishop Hughes Interprets American Liberty and Its Abuses to the Holy See, March 23, 1858,” in *Documents of American Catholic History*, ed. John Tracy Ellis (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1956), 341.

³⁶ William Bryk, “Dagger John and the Triumph of the Irish,” *City of Smoke: New York History, Commentary, and Culture* (March 5, 2009), <http://www.cityofsmoke.com/archives/991> (accessed November 20, 2011).

³⁷ Kern (accessed November 20, 2011).

practice their own religious beliefs in an independent setting.³⁸ The final major motivator behind the Second Plenary council was the even more rapidly expanding Church. Immigration continued steadily through the 1850's and by 1860, there were roughly 2,439,000 Catholics in the United States, comprising 8% of the nation's population.³⁹ Having more than doubled in size between the first and second councils, the Church's dioceses likewise expanded: one additional metropolitan see had been established in San Francisco, and the number of suffragan sees had jumped from 26 to 40; Catholic parishes increased from 1,411 in 1852 to 3,366 in 1866.⁴⁰ Expansion was so rapid that St. John Neumann, Bishop of Philadelphia, had opened new churches "at a rate of one almost every month."⁴¹ Archbishop Hughes had likewise tripled the size of the New York province.⁴² The rapid expansion of the Church, in addition to the plethora of social and political issues in America, made the convening of the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore an urgent matter.

Granted permission by the Holy See in 1866, the Second Council was held in October of the same year, and was attended by almost 200 bishops and theologians with great fanfare and many spectators.⁴³ The council's primary focus was the unification of new dioceses, as well as to address the previously mentioned ills that had befallen the Church. The leaders of the council elected to adopt the same procedural policies used by the United States Senate for both the large sessions and all of its sub-council meetings. This decision highlighted the Church's assimilation with American styles of leadership and institutionalization.⁴⁴ To further cement the image of the Catholic Church's relationship with the American government, President Andrew Johnson was

³⁸ Guilday, 192.

³⁹ Finke and Stark, 122.

⁴⁰ Guilday, 188-194.

⁴¹ "St. John Neumann" (accessed November 20, 2011).

⁴² Patrick Hayes, "John Hughes," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07516a.htm> (accessed November 20, 2011).

⁴³ Guilday, 198.

⁴⁴ Guilday, 198.

among those in attendance.⁴⁵ The size of the council caused it to issue significantly more decrees than the previous one. The first council's decree on education, mostly a recommendation to parish priests to establish Catholic schools, was short and decisive. The ninth decree from the second council's set of decrees, however, was much longer. Included in the decree was a call for Catholic teachers working in public schools to be employed in parish schools whenever possible, and that parochial schools "should be erected in every parish." Furthermore, for those parents who could not afford the cost of Catholic schools, "catechism classes should be instituted in the churches," "especially in preparation for First Holy Communion and Confirmation."^{46, 47} It was evident that Church leaders were focused on incorporating as many public school children into the Catholic education system as was possible, and the implementation of after-school catechism classes helped achieve their goal. The last decree on K-12 education was a call for the creation of "industrial schools...wherever they are found necessary," further demonstrating the Church's changing views on how to best provide a Catholic education for as many of its adherents as possible.⁴⁸

The implications of the Second Plenary Council, though not legally binding within the Catholic Church, were significant in two ways. First, they expressed the Church's changing views on its role in education, encouraging parish priests and bishops to begin establishing parochial schools and classes in an effort to reach as many children as possible. Their acknowledgement of the dangers of Protestant-led religious inculcation in the public schools was enough to drive the creation of hundreds of Catholic schools. Secondly, the Council's decrees on education further polarized the differences between Catholics and Protestants, who would

⁴⁵ Fanning, "The Plenary Councils of Baltimore" (accessed November 20, 2011).

⁴⁶ Fanning, "The Plenary Councils of Baltimore" (accessed November 20, 2011).

⁴⁷ Guilday, 211.

⁴⁸ Guilday, 211.

soon see a clear threat to their public schools through the establishment of entire Catholic school systems. With continued attempts by diocesan leaders to secure public funding for their private schools, in addition to the legal implications of educating children for democratic participation through Catholic schools, Protestants would soon begin the largest push in the anti-Catholic movement of the nineteenth century.

The Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, 1884

The American Catholic Church witnessed remarkable growth during the eighteen years between the second and third Plenary Councils. In 1866, the Catholic population had rested around 2.5 million, yet by 1870 there were 3,555,000 Catholics in America. In 1890, there were more than 7.3 million, and although there are not exact figures for 1880, it can be estimated that the Catholic population around the time of the Third Plenary Council would have been between 5-6 million.⁴⁹ Doubling between the first and second councils, and again by the time of the third council, the Catholic population was increasing so rapidly that education became a pressing issue for the American bishops. Concerned by the low attendance rate of Catholic schools, several bishops wrote to the Congregation of Propaganda, a council in the Vatican responsible for the spread of the Catholic faith, for advice on how to get more children into their schools. The Propaganda wrote back in 1875, informing the bishops that “to allow this tender age [the developmental early years] to pass without religion is surely a great evil,” and that “every effort, then, must be directed towards starting Catholic schools where they are not, and, where they are, towards enlarging them and providing them with better accommodations and equipment until they have nothing to suffer, as regards teachers or equipment, by comparison with the public

⁴⁹ Finke and Stark, 122.

schools.”⁵⁰ American bishops, under the guidance of the Vatican, undertook endeavors to strengthen existing Catholic schools while simultaneously creating more.

Convinced of the absolute need for Catholic schools to replace public schools as the educational outlet for Catholic children, Church leaders began looking into different ways to improve the opportunities for low-income students to attend parochial schools. In New York, Archbishop Hughes, who passed away in 1864, had already established the Catholic education system; Archbishop John McCloskey, who would later become the first American Cardinal, continued Hughes’s work on Catholic education. New York’s Catholic school system grew steadily with the increase in immigration, and in 1875 was able to secure public funding for select schools. Much to the outrage of Protestants, political corruption at Tammany Hall in the mid-nineteenth century catered to the swelling Catholic population to secure votes. As a reward for those votes, Catholic schools were awarded close to \$1.4 million of public funds.⁵¹ Attempts of securing public funds for private schools, whether successful or not, prompted the supporters of public schools to view Catholic bishops as “attacking” democratic education. As evident in Thomas Nast’s famous political cartoon depicting bishops as crocodiles attacking public school children on the American shore, public funding of private schools was not in the least bit popular among Protestants.⁵²

The debate surrounding public funding of private schools escalated to a national level. By December of 1875, President Grant’s “annual message to Congress recommended a constitutional amendment prohibiting...the “granting of any school funds or school taxes...for

⁵⁰ “Instruction of the Congregation of Propaganda de Fide Concerning Catholic Children Attending American Public Schools, November 24, 1875,” in *Documents of American Catholic History*, ed. John Tracy Ellis (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1956), 416-420.

⁵¹ “Sectarian Schools,” *The Index: Liberty and Light* 6 (1875): 531.
<http://books.google.com/ebooks?id=gJhAQAAMAAJ>

⁵² Thomas Nast, “The American River Ganges,” in *Harp Week Cartoons*, ed. Robert C. Kennedy (2009), <http://www.harpweek.com/09Cartoon/BrowseByDateCartoon.asp?Month=May&Date=8> (accessed November 20, 2011).

the benefit or in aid, directly or indirectly, of any religious sect or denomination”.”⁵³ With the president’s intervention, this issue took a prominent national spotlight, which sparked Congressman James Blaine to pursue legislation to put a constitutional amendment up for adoption by the states. The text of the legislation specifically said “...no money raised by taxation in any State for the support of public schools...shall ever be under the control of any religious sect, or denomination,” and would leave no ambiguity as to the role of public funds in private schools. The U.S. House overwhelmingly passed the bill in 1875, but it was struck down in the Senate by only four votes.⁵⁴ Though the legislation was not adopted at the federal level, it set a precedent for states to include it as an amendment to their own constitutions; today, 37 states carry legislation that resembles the Blaine Amendment in some capacity, outlawing the use of public funds for private schools.⁵⁵

Despite efforts at the state level to constrict funding for Catholic education, and in the wake of continuing acts of violence such as the Orange Riots in New York City, American bishops continued to reform their parochial schools. By 1884, public schools had largely removed religion other than the reading of the Bible from their classrooms, and this caused great anxiety among Church leaders. The pastoral letter of 1884 exclaimed, “the three great educational agencies are the home, the Church and the school...each of them...must foster religion...[but many] are content to see it excluded from the school.” The letter later claimed “childhood and youth are the periods of life when character ought especially to be subjected to religious influences...school is an important factor in the forming of childhood...so important that its influence often outweighs that of home and Church.” The letter, which was

⁵³ William W. Brickman and Stanley Lehrer, eds., *Religion, Government, and Education* (New York: Society for the Advancement of Education, 1961), 260.

⁵⁴ Brickman and Lehrer, 260.

⁵⁵ “What are Blaine Amendments?” in *The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty* (2008), <http://www.blaineamendments.org/Intro/whatis.html> (accessed November 20, 2011).

representative of the bishops' concerns over public education, argued for religion in schools so that, through the school's great influence in each child's life, they would consider religion practical for "real life."⁵⁶

Across the nation, provincial councils were held to address the state of Catholic education within the differing dioceses and metropolitan sees. In Cincinnati, for example, an 1858 provincial council decreed "all pastors are bound, under pain of mortal sin, to provide a Catholic school in every parish or congregation subject to them."⁵⁷ Decrees such as this one placed education as one of the most important responsibilities of parish pastors, yet not all provinces held this viewpoint, at least on paper. Such inconsistencies in education across the various metropolitan sees needed to be addressed by the American Catholic hierarchy. In 1883, the Propaganda called several American archbishops to Rome to discuss the future of the American church in general. After consulting the American archbishops, the Propaganda recommended that the Holy Father approve a third Plenary Council, which was done in early 1884.⁵⁸

The Third Plenary Council was held in November of 1884, and was attended by one cardinal, "eleven other archbishops...[and] fifty-eight [suffragan] bishops."⁵⁹ The statistics on attendance illustrate that during the eighteen-year gap between the second and third councils, five new metropolitan sees had been created in addition to at least eighteen new suffragan dioceses. Due to the size of the council's attendance, the issues among the council were split into twelve sub-councils, each with its own theologian, and the committees' proposed decrees

⁵⁶ Francis P. Cassidy, "Catholic Education in the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore. II," in *The Catholic Historical Review* XXXIV, eds. John Tracy Ellis et al. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1949), 431-432.

⁵⁷ Cassidy, 432.

⁵⁸ Cassidy, 427.

⁵⁹ Guilday, 223.

were brought back to the general assembly for approval.⁶⁰ The previous two councils had merely adopted and only partially edited the education decree dating back to the First Provincial Council of Baltimore in 1829; by the Third Plenary Council, education had been agreed upon as a topic deserving considerable attention, and the decrees resulting from it substantiate the bishops' desires. Title VI of the Vatican-approved decrees from the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore had several components regarding Catholic education. First was the *mandate*, rather than request, that pastors establish parochial schools for their parishes within two years of the publication of these decrees. Second, this decree was largely in response to the questions posed by the Propaganda letter in 1875, regarding how bishops could get more Catholic students into their schools. The council decreed that "we not only exhort Catholic parents...but we *command* them with all the authority in our power, to procure a truly Christian education for their dear offspring...[and] send them to Catholic...schools," unless they otherwise obtained permission from their local bishop, a large step in the influence of the Catholic Church over its adherents.⁶¹

The third component of Title VI was the standardization of the curriculum in Catholic schools, so that they could not only become more efficient and competitive with public schools, but also to ensure that each Catholic student would receive a consistent education. The decree focused on some specific ways through which this would be achieved, such as through the instruction of young children preparing for their First Holy Communion, three times a week for six weeks.⁶² The fourth and final part of the decree addressed higher education. In 1884, the modern high school was still developing as an important institution in American education.⁶³

The Catholic Church's acknowledgement that the high school, as well as university, would play

⁶⁰ Guilday, 226.

⁶¹ Guilday, 238.

⁶² Cassidy, 434.

⁶³ Maris A. Vinovksis, "19th Century High Schools" (lecture presented in "The History of Education," at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, September 26, 2011).

a useful role in the education of children and young adults marked a significant advancement in its previous perceptions of education. Given the lack of significant change between the First and Second Plenary Councils, this drastically different outlook on the benefits of education, though shaped by the Vatican and the Propaganda's letter in 1875, was a true breakthrough for Catholic schools. By 1900, there would be 100 Catholic high schools within the American hierarchy, and by 1920, that number would jump to 1,500.⁶⁴ Though parents were not obligated to send their children to Catholic schools under the threat of "mortal sin," or the idea that they would be damned to Hell for not sending their children to Catholic schools, they were heavily encouraged to take advantage of the opportunities that the Catholic Church was soon to present.⁶⁵

The Third Plenary Council of Baltimore was by far the most significant of the series of councils held between 1852 and 1884 for several reasons. First, it was the culminating event of Catholic advancement in educational importance, and it marked the first instance of the Church utilizing its strength and authority to mandate that children attend its schools. The requirement that parents send their children to Catholic schools, to the best of their ability, contributed to a substantial rise in the number of Catholic schools. By 1900, there were about 11 million Catholics living in the United States, who were serviced by roughly 3,500 parochial schools, a substantial increase from only fifty years before at the time of the First Plenary Council.^{66,67} Second, the council established the first set of standards to which pastors and Catholic school leaders would be held accountable. The provisions that outlined specific ways to make schools more efficient and competitive with public schools reflected the Church's more aggressive stance toward Catholic children's education, and illustrated its true discontent with public schooling.

⁶⁴ National Catholic Educators' Association (accessed November 20, 2011).

⁶⁵ Guilday, 329.

⁶⁶ Finke and Stark, 122.

⁶⁷ National Catholic Educators' Association (accessed November 20, 2011).

The events leading up to the third council, with political debate over the role of religious institutions in the democratic education of American children, helped contribute to this aspect of the decree, as it brought the issue of education to the top of each bishop's priority list.

Third, the council emphasized unity among its different provinces by establishing a firm set of regulations governing education. Setting a two-year limit in which to construct schools kept parishes across the nation on track to a unified "re-emergence" of Catholic education as a dominant instructional force. Previously, through the last thirty years, the introduction of new metropolitan sees limited the ability of the American hierarchy to implement unified policy outside of plenary councils, and the education decrees in the prior two councils had been weak compared to those of the third. Therefore, the third council reflected the growing nature of the hierarchy itself, spreading its authority to virtually every aspect of Catholic life in an effort to make it consistent across different parts of the nation. The ultimate goal was to permit Catholics from the east coast to travel to the west, and find the same school structures that they had at home. Through the Third Plenary Council, the Roman Catholic Church was largely successful in standardizing its image.

Conclusion

The history of the three Plenary Councils of Baltimore tells a significant story that illustrates the progression of Catholicism's views on education, and ultimately shows how receptive the Church was to adapting its priorities to better serve its adherents. Emerging very slowly in the United States, American Catholicism witnessed rapid growth during the mid to late nineteenth century, with its population growing from 24,000 at the time of the American Revolution to around six million by the conclusion of the Third Plenary Council. However, the rapid expansion of adherents, mostly due to immigration, did not come without costs. Growing

numbers of Catholics arriving on the shores of the United States, and the strengthening of the Church with each provincial and plenary council held, caused Protestants to deeply fear the influence of “popery” and the monarchical structure of the Catholic Church. The swelling Catholic population in the United States caused a backlash against the Church, aggravating the division between Catholics and Protestants dating back to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Through political movements, such as the dominance of the Know Nothing Party, as well as through the use of local legislation targeted at the property holdings of churches and their schools, anti-Catholicism became a powerful movement in American history. Often successful, each political move sparked an equal and opposite reaction by the Church in the form of the Plenary Councils, whose aims were to further strengthen the American Catholic Church. Protestants soon resorted to acts of violence against Catholic institutions and Catholics themselves, which led to a series of riots and uprisings in large Catholic communities such as New York and Philadelphia. These riots left buildings burned and people wounded or dead, and fueled the anti-Catholic rhetoric found throughout public schools.

As the Church expanded with its surging constituency, it was faced with the need to divide itself into more manageable units, or metropolitan sees, that would cover a wide breadth of land. With the creation of each archdiocese came a loss in unification, as not only the lack of a central American authority, but also an increase in regional councils and policies made it difficult to maintain coherence between the different units. The three Plenary Councils were convened, therefore, out of the necessity to address regional differences as well as remain unified in the face of anti-Catholicism. Facing the threat of losing their young to the indoctrination of Protestant values in public schools, Catholic leaders and parents alike looked into alternate methods of education, an issue that was addressed to some degree at each council. The decrees

of the first council, which nationalized the education decrees from the Provincial Councils of Baltimore, established the official need for schools. The Second Plenary Council, held fourteen years after the first, re-emphasized the importance of Catholic education, but still lacked a decisive action plan. The difference between the first two councils, with the second placing a greater emphasis on the role of the Church in the education of its youth, illustrates the growing views of Catholic leaders and the Church overall. Previously interested predominantly on its own establishment, the Church had afforded little time to focus on schools. Though they existed, albeit sporadically, throughout the nation, they were originally viewed as mere extensions of the local church. The second council reflected a change in the perceptions of Catholic leaders, and the activity of American bishops in the period between the second and third councils would demonstrate their shifting priorities.

As American bishops began to see the crisis that developed in education as religion's role in schools continued to change, they became proactive in determining a solution. Peter Guilday most accurately summarized the new dynamic between religion and public schooling, noting that between the second and third councils, "the public school system had made great progress in the United States, but step-by-step with that progress went an increasing abandonment of religious teaching and influence."⁶⁸ Coupled with the violence that spread throughout the nation, Catholics found themselves with a dilemma. They either had to prevent public schools from dismembering religious ideology (especially Catholic), or risk losing their children to the anti-Catholic sentiments that flooded public institutions. Given the political climate in which the Blaine Amendments were adopted in most states, legal intervention in the public schools was unlikely; so, too, was the option of permitting their children to lose their faith. Catholic leaders

⁶⁸ Guilday, 237.

therefore recognized the need to address the dire urgency of developing parochial schools throughout the nation. Hence, the Third Plenary Council's decree that *mandated* rather than beseeched pastors to build schools, and required parents to send their offspring to them, marked a revolutionary change in the Church's standing on education. Though they had always held education as an important facet of religious development, this was the first time that Church officials recognized that maintaining separate parochial schools was essential to the Church's future.

The transformation of Catholic schools during the three Plenary Councils was a directional change that placed the Catholic school system on track to become the largest private school network in the United States. Shifting from a small minority with few legal concessions at the founding of the United States, Catholicism would expand to have over seventeen million adherents with over 6,500 parochial schools in 1920, a number that would increase until its peak in the 1960s.^{69,70} Today, the Catholic school system still remains the largest non-public component of American education, a fact that would not have been made possible without the progression of decrees from the Plenary Councils. Though Catholics still faced tremendous opposition after the Third Plenary Council, such as the formation of the notoriously anti-Catholic Ku Klux Klan, their presence in the future of the United States became concrete. The three Plenary Councils, sparked in part by aggressive anti-Catholicism and in part by rapidly rising Catholic populations, trace the evolution of Catholic education's role in American society, a role that would propel it to become the strongest non-public educator of American children.

⁶⁹ Finke and Stark, 122.

⁷⁰ National Catholic Educators' Association (accessed November 23, 2011).

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