

# COMMUNION OF IMMIGRANTS



A HISTORY OF CATHOLICS IN AMERICA



James T. Fisher

# COMMUNION OF IMMIGRANTS

---



# COMMUNION OF IMMIGRANTS

---

*A History of Catholics in America*

JAMES T. FISHER

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further  
Oxford University's objective of excellence  
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi  
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece  
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore  
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Copyright © 2000, 2002, 2008 by James T. Fisher

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 2008

First published in hardcover as *Catholics in America* (2000) and in paperback  
*Communion of Immigrants: A History of Catholics in America* (2002)

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.

198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

[www.oup.com](http://www.oup.com)

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,  
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fisher, James Terence.

Communication of immigrants : a history of Catholics in America / James  
T. Fisher.—Update ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-533330-5 (pbk.)

1. Catholic Church—United States—History. 2. United States—Church  
history. I. Title.

BX1406.3.F57 2007

282'.73—dc22 2007019582

*Frontispiece:* Mexican-American girls pose before a crucifix adorned with roses at a  
ceremony marking their first reception of the sacrament of Holy Communion.  
The ceremony took place in Arizona around the year 1900.

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

*To Charlie*

*This page intentionally left blank*

# CONTENTS

---

## PREFACE

ix

## CHAPTER ONE Catholics in the New World

1

## CHAPTER TWO Building an American Catholic Community

24

## CHAPTER THREE The Rise of the Immigrant Church

43

## CHAPTER FOUR Catholic and American

69

## CHAPTER FIVE Reformers and Crusaders

93

## CHAPTER SIX The Uneasy Triumph of Catholic America

114

## CHAPTER SEVEN The People of God Divided?

137

## CHRONOLOGY

169

## FURTHER READING

172

## INDEX

177



*This page intentionally left blank*

## PREFACE

Roman Catholicism has been the largest religious denomination in the United States since the late 19th century. The Catholic church grew enormously as a result of the mass immigration of European peoples to America between the 1840s and early 1920s. Catholic laborers played an integral role in building the roads, canals, and factories that propelled the United States to world economic supremacy. Catholics also built cities and their most characteristic feature: the urban neighborhood. With churches made from brick and stone at their heart, ethnic parishes helped to shape the landscape of urban American democracy. The parish was the site of a rich devotional life for Catholics as well as an array of festivals and sporting events that blended neatly with an emerging mass popular culture. By 1900 American Catholics enjoyed tremendous local and national influence in such fields as politics and journalism, firefighting and law enforcement.

If the Catholic experience in America is a great success story it is also the story of an uneasy triumph. While the church was widely viewed in a favorable light when it was small and its leaders shared much in common with prominent members of other Christian denominations, the arrival of waves of immigrants in the mid-19th century aroused grave concerns over the church's allegedly "foreign" character. Leaders of the American church created in turn a vast network of institutions that provided cradle to grave services for lay people, in many cases greatly limiting their interaction with Americans from other faith traditions. For many years Catholics were also often relegated to the margins in standard accounts of American religious history. Yet the separation of Catholics from the mainstream of American life was often stronger in theory than in practice. American Catholics played leading roles in shaping the contours of American patriotism. By the late 19th century a vigorous debate emerged within the American Catholic community over the ideal balance to strike between national and religious identities. That discussion continues today as a sign of the church's continuing vitality.

America is a nation of immigrants and the story of Catholics in America is largely the story of an immigrant church. The influx of an extraordinarily diverse population of newcomers since the 1960s has reinvigorated the church. The devotion of these immigrants and their families has shown once again that the Catholic experience is an integral force in the life of the nation.

## Catholics in the New World

On April 14, 1528, a band of 400 Spanish explorers in fourships made landfall on the west coast of Florida, in a bay not far from the present-day city of Sarasota. The expedition was led by red-bearded Pánfilo de Narváez, a one-eyed former governor of Cuba. His second in command was 37-year-old Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, a veteran of several military campaigns on behalf of the Holy Roman Empire and the heir to a family with large landholdings near the southern Spanish coastal city of Cadiz. After being deposed as governor of Paraguay, Cabeza de Vaca would return in chains to Cadiz in 1543, the same port to which Christopher Columbus, the devoutly Catholic explorer from Genoa, had returned bound in irons following his third voyage to the New World, in 1500. Cabeza de Vaca, like Columbus, was subject to the whims of his sponsors and the resentments of his subordinates. His setbacks, however, could not diminish the magnitude of his achievement as the first European to travel across the North American continent, from Florida to the Gulf of California.

Cabeza de Vaca compiled a report of the ill-fated Florida expedition that has been described as the first great work of American literature. It is also a testimony to the author's powerful devotion to the Roman Catholic Church. The Spanish expeditionary party, which included five priests of the Franciscan order (a community founded by St. Francis of Assisi in 1209), was charged with conquering the Florida territory, believed at the time to extend far to the west of its location on the peninsula. Shortly after going ashore the Spaniards captured four Native Americans, whom they called Indians and who indicated through the use of sign language the existence of a gold-laden province to the northwest. In the course of seeking and later fleeing from that desolate terrain, all but four of the original explorers perished. Among the survivors was Cabeza de Vaca, who was shipwrecked off the coast of Texas and rescued by Native Americans in November 1528. He served them over the next six years as healer, slave, and merchant before fleeing with his three compatriots into the interior of New Spain, in what is today the country of Mexico.

The Spaniards came to the New World to seek riches and to claim vast expanses of land for the Crown as well as to win souls for the church. Along with the vast majority of Europeans who came to North America, Cabeza de Vaca believed that the Indians were "wild, untaught savages" who must be converted to Christianity. The idea that Native American civilizations could be considered complete and valuable in their present state was inconceivable to Catholics and Protestants alike in the age of exploration and conquest. In his report to Charles I, the king of Spain, who also ruled as Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Cabeza de Vaca described how he and his colleagues "taught the people by signs, which they understood, that in Heaven there was a Man we called God, who had created the

heavens and the earth; that all good came from Him and that we worshipped and obeyed Him and called Him our Lord; and that if they would do the same, all would be well with them.” Yet just as Cabeza de Vaca recognized differences between the Native American tribes he encountered, he also learned that not all of his compatriots shared his view that the Indians “must be won by kindness, the only certain way.”

Cabeza de Vaca referred to the Europeans in North America simply as Christians. Martin Luther, the German leader of a reform movement that led to a proliferation of Protestant churches in northern Europe, had been excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church just seven years prior to the expedition led by Pánfilo de Narváez. But the Reformation was of little concern to the Spaniards, who continued to equate Christianity with the Roman Catholicism that had reigned throughout Europe for well over a thousand years.

Roman Catholics believe that Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried, and rose again on the third day as a sign that he truly was the Messiah, the only Son of God. Forty days after his resurrection Jesus ascended into heaven and took his place at the right hand of God. The third person of the Blessed Trinity, the Holy Spirit, soon directed the apostles to spread the news of Christ’s life and resurrection, through which he conquered death and offered eternal life to those who believed in him. The leader of these apostles, Peter (“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church,” Jesus tells his disciple, as reported in the Gospel of Matthew), eventually made his way to Rome, the center of the Western world at that time.

Peter’s successors as head of the church, the bishops of Rome, came to be known as the popes. The early church endured much suffering and persecution, but by the fourth century Roman Catholicism had become the dominant religious

and cultural force in Europe. Through the centuries, the church inevitably became embroiled in political controversies that led to calls for reform. Martin Luther, a former priest who rose to prominence in the early 16th century, was not the first but was by far the most influential critic of certain practices within the church that were widely viewed as scandalous. In the two centuries before Luther's time the church had suffered from corrupt leadership and rampant nepotism (the granting of high positions to family members, in this case relatives of the popes). Martin Luther particularly objected to the church's selling of indulgences, spiritual favors that removed "vestiges" of sins already forgiven by God through the church. Luther insisted that God's grace was a free gift not linked to such spiritual "works" as indulgences. The Protestant reform movement Luther helped launch taught that women and men were granted salvation by faith alone, not by "good works" that could be manipulated by the church's earthly leaders.

The Spanish Catholic explorers of the New World believed that in bringing Christianity to its Indians and claiming its possessions for the Crown they would earn eternal salvation. Cabeza de Vaca was not a priest, but he was no less committed than his Franciscan countrymen to the conversion and spiritual welfare of the Native Americans. Tensions unavoidably erupted among the Spaniards in North America, however, pitting those who viewed their mission as primarily religious against the many *conquistadores* (conquerors) whose motives were more personal, political, and economic in nature. Cabeza de Vaca sought to spare the Native Americans from the *conquistadores* who were killing or enslaving them. At the same time, however, he warned the Indians, as he wrote in his report to the king, that if they failed to "serve God as we required," the Christians "would treat them hard and carry them away to strange lands as slaves."

Some *conquistadores* claimed that the Native Americans should not be converted to Christianity, arguing that they were not even human. In response, in 1537 Pope Paul III issued a papal decree in which he affirmed that “the Indians are truly men” who “are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property; even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; and that they may and should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved.” But a year later, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V—who in his other capacity as the king of Spain was also the sponsor of Cabeza de Vaca’s mission—convinced the pope to revoke punishments imposed by missionaries on *conquistadores* who had mistreated Indians. Although Charles subsequently instituted reforms designed to lessen the abuse of Native Americans by Spaniards in the New World, irreparable harm had already been done.

Cabeza de Vaca’s journey helped pave the way for the rapid expansion of Roman Catholicism in the regions he explored. On September 8, 1565, a solemn mass was celebrated at St. Augustine, Florida, on the feast day of the nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The ceremony also marked the arrival of Pedro Menendez de Avilés, captain-general of the Indies fleet, who had been dispatched by King Philip II of Spain to establish a permanent Catholic settlement in Florida. St. Augustine became the site of the first American parish. Mission stations were soon established in nearby villages by Franciscans as well as by Jesuits, members of a religious order (the Society of Jesus) founded by Ignatius Loyola and formally established by the church in 1540. A former soldier from the Basque region of present-day Spain, Ignatius developed a spiritual doctrine that stressed the integration of prayer and service: Jesuits were urged to “find God in all things.”



Spanish Catholicism of the Franciscan and Jesuit varieties exerted great impact on the missions created between the early 17th and late 18th centuries in present-day Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California. Because Mexico City was the capital of New Spain, these remote northern outposts were often sparsely populated and many were short-lived, but they left a complex legacy among the Native American populations for many generations to come.

The missions were a central component of both the church's activity in the New World and the highly elaborate imperial bureaucracy orchestrated from Spain. The missions were designed to gather local Indians together in one place so that, as Pope Paul III commanded in 1537, they "should be converted to the faith of Jesus Christ by preaching the word of God and by the example of good and holy living." Far more than mere centers of conversion and worship, the missions also provided educational, medical, and social services. The Spanish hoped to transplant a piece of their civilization to the frontier and build a self-sustaining community that would separate converted Indians from the non-Christians living outside the walls of the mission.

The Indians were enticed by the spiritual and healing prowess of the missionaries as well as by the promise of protection and the offer of such basic necessities as food and shelter. As a Jesuit in Arizona explained, "Indians do not come to Christian service when they do not see the maize pot boiling." At the same time, many Indians were attracted to the richly symbolic nature of the Roman Catholic faith. As a priest at the mission in San Francisco recalled, "I brought out a representation of our holy father St. Francis, most edifying, and upon my presenting it to the Indians to kiss they did so with much veneration, to all appearances, and willingness, that they stole my heart and the hearts of all who observed them."

An Italian Jesuit, Francisco Eusebio Kino, founded Spanish missions across southern Arizona in the 1690s. In 1700 he established the mission of San Xavier del Bac on a site near contemporary Tucson. The church Kino built there was destroyed, but another mission church was erected in the last two decades of the 18th century. The church of San Xavier del Bac (known as “the White Dove of the Desert” for its graceful appearance) is a blend of baroque, Moorish, and Byzantine styles and is widely considered the finest example of Spanish Renaissance architecture found in America. Kino worked among the Pima Indians and was more respectful of Native American cultures than many of his missionary colleagues were. In an account of his work, written in 1710, Kino described his travels in the Southwest and reported that over a 21-year period “there have been brought to our friendship and to the desire of receiving our holy Catholic faith . . . more than thirty thousand souls, there being sixteen thousand of Pimas alone.”

The California missions founded by the Spanish Franciscan Junipero Serra between 1769 and his death in 1784 were noted for their ambitious and often lucrative agricultural programs. Serra was a former philosophy teacher who was working as a missionary in Mexico when, at the age of 59, he was appointed to launch the Franciscans’ California mission program. He quickly established communities at San Diego, San Luis Obispo, San Francisco, and other locations along the California coast. Serra’s motto was “Always forward, never back,” and he proved an able builder and administrator of missions.

The California missions, like those in the desert Southwest, offered their subjects protection against both rival Native Americans and violent elements within the community of Spanish settlers. The mission *padres* (Spanish for “fathers”) insisted that the Indians under their care convert willingly, but

these “neophytes,” or newly converted people, were not permitted to leave the missions for extended periods, in part because the padres took full responsibility for the souls of their converts. The inhabitants of the missions were often severely punished if they attempted to leave, and even after converting to Christianity they had few of the rights and privileges enjoyed by the Spaniards. Between 1769 and 1784 more than 6,000 California Indians were baptized at missions founded by Serra. For several decades after his death, California was dependent for its survival on the economic productivity of the missions he had set up.

The Spanish missions in North America differed from one another in certain respects but shared many features in common. The missionaries directed much of their efforts toward Native American children, through whom they hoped to create new generations of Christians. In fact, the missionaries tended to treat all the Native Americans as children who could only gradually embrace the European Christian way of life; in the meantime they would remain separated from both the Spaniards and other Indians outside the enclosure. This segregation did not, however, prevent the spread of diseases among the native populations, who lacked immunity to many sicknesses, such as cholera and smallpox, introduced to North America by Europeans. The combination of disease, mistreatment, and overwork had a devastating impact on Native American populations throughout the Southwest.

While some of the earliest Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries had a sincere desire to understand the Native Americans’ languages and cultures, the Spanish government quickly discouraged these efforts for fear the missionaries would shift their loyalties from the Crown to their Indian subjects.

Although Catholicism was the official state religion in Spain, the church had allowed itself to become dominated by the monarchy, which therefore enjoyed full control over the religious institutions established in North America.

The Spanish conquerors found themselves beset by internal strife, especially between missionaries and colonial administrators. In 1773 Father Serra traveled to Mexico to petition the colonial government successfully to free the missions from civil control. Several years later he reported that "when we came not a Christian existed here . . . we regenerated all in Christ; and . . . we have come and we are all here for their welfare and salvation. At all events, I believe it is well known that we love them." That love did not translate, however, into a belief in self-rule for their Native American Christian neophytes. The Franciscans' deeply spiritual concern for the welfare of their charges was not always sufficient to protect them against exploitation and brutality, though the plight of the Indians in California only worsened when the Mexican government removed the padres from the missions in the 1830s.

Junipero Serra and many other Spanish missionaries to North America were inspired by the religious renewal that began in 16th-century Spanish Catholicism, an era dominated by such remarkable figures as St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and St. Ignatius Loyola. These individuals were visionaries who inspired many others to endure hardship and suffering and to sacrifice their own desires for the good of the church.

But Spanish Catholics in North America sometimes combined this powerful quest on behalf of the church with an equally fervent drive for personal spiritual authority. Álgvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, for example, had returned to New Spain in 1543 to conduct an expedition deep into the jungles of

Paraguay in search of the legendary golden city of Manoa. His troops soon grew resentful of him, however, not only because he forbade them to mistreat the native peoples but also because he presented himself as a “divine agent” and ordered his men to transport his weighty camp bed across the jungle. He was deposed and returned to Spain a prisoner, then was vindicated only a few years before his death in 1557. Cabeza de Vaca’s complex legacy—his blend of religious zeal and personal grandiosity—was echoed in the lives and work of numerous Europeans who sought to bring Christianity to North America in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries.

While the Spanish focused their colonizing efforts on the “borderlands” of Mexico, the 17th century saw the French concentrate on Canada. From that base adventurers and missionaries explored parts of the future states of Maine, New York, and Michigan, as well as the Mississippi Valley. Unlike Spain, France was home to a significant community of Protestants, known as Huguenots, who had been granted limited religious freedom under the Edict of Nantes in 1598. In 1608 the first permanent French settlement in North America was founded at Quebec by Samuel de Champlain, a devout Catholic acting as the agent of a Huguenot businessman, Pierre du Guast, Sieur de Monts. Because few Huguenots had settled in North America prior to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, French Canada became dominated by Catholics, many of whom hoped to build a Christian society in the wilderness, while others—notably the fur traders—came seeking riches.

From the 1630s until 1763, when Canada came under British rule, the Jesuits were the dominant missionaries of New France. The Jesuit missionary Isaac Jogues worked among the Huron Indians in Michigan and northern New York, where he was captured by Iroquois rivals of the Huron in 1642. A year