

Slavery and the Catholic Church

Once again the Catholic Church is being accused of another grave scandal. Some people claim that the Church before 1890 was either silent or approved of slavery. It is claimed that no Pope condemned slavery until then. According to one modern theologian: "...one can search in vain through the interventions of the Holy See - those of Pius V, Urban VIII and Benedict XIV - for any condemnation of the actual principle of slavery." [Panzer, p. 2] Other people further claim that the Church changed Her teaching on slavery, so the Church can change Her teachings on other issues too. A recent book, entitled **The Popes and Slavery** written by Fr. Joel S. Panzer (Alba House, 1996), shows that the Popes did condemn racial slavery as early as 1435. Most of the information below is found in this book.

The issue and history of slavery are quite complex. Throughout history, the Church found Herself among cultures practicing slavery and had to deal with it. An early example is St. Paul's **Epistle to Philemon**. St. Paul appears to tolerate slavery, but he also warned slave masters that they too have a Master in Heaven who would judge them (Col. 4:1). Due to Her weakness in political affairs, the Church could not stop every evil practice. However, political weakness is quite different than approval. There are many examples of saints buying slaves and then setting them free (e.g. St. Nicholas, Trinitarian Fathers & White Fathers). Unfortunately there were also Catholics and even clergy, who participated in slavery, and their sins caused scandal to the Church.

Now we usually think of slavery in terms of innocent people who were unjustly captured and reduced to "beasts of burden" due solely to their race. This was the most common form in the U.S. before the Thirteenth Amendment. This form of slavery, known as racial slavery, began in large-scale during the 15th century and was formally condemned by the Popes as early as 1435, fifty-seven years before Columbus discovered America. In 1404, the Spanish discovered the Canary Islands. They began to colonize the island and enslave its people. Pope Eugene IV in 1435 wrote to Bishop Ferdinand of Lanzarote in his Bull, ***Sicut Dudum***:

Those faithful, who did not obey, were excommunicated *ipso facto*. A century later, the Spanish and Portuguese were colonizing South America. Unfortunately the practice of slavery did not end. Even though far from being a saint, Pope Paul III in 1537 issued a Bull against slavery, entitled ***Sublimis Deus***, to the universal Church. He wrote:

Pope Paul not only condemned the slavery of Indians but also "*all other peoples*." In his phrase "*unheard of before now*", he seems to see a difference between this new form of slavery (i.e. racial slavery) and the ancient forms of just-title slavery. A few days before, he also issued a Brief, entitled ***Pastorale Officium*** to Cardinal Juan de Tavera of Toledo, which warned the Catholic faithful of excommunication for participating in slavery. Unfortunately Pope Paul made reference to the King of Castile and Aragon in this Brief. Under political pressure, the Pope later retracted this Brief but did not annul the Bull. It is interesting to note that even though he retracted his Brief, Popes Gregory XIV, Urban VIII and Benedict XIV still recognized and confirmed its authority against slavery and the slave trade.

Popes Gregory XIV (*Cum Sicuti*, 1591), Urban VIII (*Commissum Nobis*, 1639) and Benedict XIV (*Immensa Pastorum*, 1741) also condemned slavery and the slave trade. Unlike the earlier papal letters, these excommunications were more directed towards the clergy than the laity. In 1839, Pope Gregory XVI issued a Bull, entitled ***In Supremo***. Its main focus was against slave trading, but it also clearly condemned racial slavery:

Unfortunately a few American bishops misinterpreted this Bull as condemning only the slave trade and not slavery itself. Bishop John England of Charleston actually wrote several letters to the Secretary of State under President Van Buren explaining that the Pope, in ***In Supremo***, did not condemn slavery but only the slave trade (Ibid., pp. 67-68).

With all these formal condemnations, it is a shame that the Popes were largely ignored by the Catholic laity and clergy. Two Catholic nations were largely involved with slave trafficking. Many Catholics at that time owned or sold

slaves. Even some Catholic bishops during the 19th-century appeared to support slavery. The Popes were so ignored that some people today claim that they were silent.

History of Catholic Church in United States Colonial era

Catholicism first came to the territories now forming the United States before the [Protestant Reformation](#) with the [Spanish](#) explorers and settlers in present-day [Florida](#) (1513) and the [southwest](#). The first Christian worship service held in the current United States was a Catholic Mass celebrated in Pensacola, FL. (St. Michael records) The influence of the [Alta California missions](#) (1769 and onwards) forms a lasting memorial to part of this heritage. In the French territories, Catholicism was ushered in with the establishment of colonies and forts in [Detroit](#), [St. Louis](#), [Mobile](#), [Biloxi](#), [Baton Rouge](#), and [New Orleans](#). As early as 1604, the French established a site in [Maine](#) on [Saint Croix Island](#), but it was short-lived. Catholicism in the Spanish (East and West Florida) and French (eastern Louisiana/Quebec) colonies was undisturbed under later administration by Britain.

In the English colonies, Catholicism was later to be seen as a stigma, even though it had been in the beginning of American colonization, from the initial period with [John Cabot](#). Queen Mary, the Catholic, was also [Queen of Chile](#), but few, if any English relations developed from this, since men such as Hawkins preferred the [Spanish Main](#) and others like Frobisher, the [Northwest Passage](#). Elizabeth, in restoring Anglicanism to favor Calvinism, had her lieutenants Drake and Raleigh attempt to found Anglican settlements. Catholicism was reintroduced with the settling of [Avalon](#) and [Maryland](#); these colonies offered a rare example of [religious toleration](#) in a fairly intolerant age, particularly amongst other English colonies which frequently exhibited a quite militant [Protestantism](#). (See the [Maryland Toleration Act](#), and note the pre-eminence of the Archdiocese of [Baltimore](#) in Catholic circles.) The [Duke of York](#), future king [James II of England](#), was also Catholic and issued the [Declaration of Indulgence](#). Combined between the duke and baron, Catholicism on the proprietary level was highly spread out in 1664, from the Potomac to the Connecticut rivers, with part of Maine and Massachusetts even held by the duke. New York's western land claims were over a vast expanse, which neighboring Protestant colonies feared to be settled by its Catholic proprietor, in contention with their own land charters.

Catholicism, thus became limited to the [Middle Colonies](#), whereas the South was officially Anglican and the North was Calvinist. English colonial religion, was a New World environment for spiritual conditions back in England, as each had then affiliated with their own kind. Whereas Catholicism was once the predominant English affiliation (with some [Lollardy](#)), the Reformation disestablished this and caused a split between magisterial and radical reformations which departed from the usual custom. The South, was thus a broad church blend of Catholic and Calvinist, whereas the North was strictly low church Calvinist and each responded to the English Civil War in their own way. The North supported the Cromwellians with troops and the South supported Charles I, who was later considered a martyr. The Catholics in America, although officially discriminated against by their Southern compatriots, were not in any position to favor the Northern Calvinists, who were more extreme in their dislike of Catholicism. The Calvinists laid siege upon Catholic rule in the Middle Colonies, deposing both the Duke of York/King of England and the then Lord Baltimore, but [Jacobitism](#) did not thrive afterwards in the colonies, apart from such isolated examples as [Flora MacDonald](#), ironically a Calvinist. The Anglicans cooperated, in order to retain their position of authority in a time when Calvinism became orthodox and accepted, while Catholicism diminished. At the time of the [American Revolution](#), Catholics formed less than 1% of the population of the thirteen colonies, and only one of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence, [Charles Carroll](#), was a Catholic. One of the reasons Americans rebelled from British rule, was the fact that French Canada was allowed freedom of religion, whereas the English colonies were still expected to toe the line of an official church. This kind of double standard inspired a nationalistic disgust in the colonists, who chose to make their 1st Amendment consist of freedom of religion, speech and press. [Irish Catholics](#) (unlike Baltimore and the [Earl of Ulster](#)/Duke of York, their English landlords) were mostly barred from settling in the colonies, but eventually came to seek a refuge from their troubled homeland and this is what revived Catholicism in America, although subsequent to independence.

19th century

The number of Roman Catholics in the United States increased almost overnight with the [Louisiana Purchase](#) in [1803](#), the [Adams-Onís Treaty](#) (purchasing Florida) in [1819](#), and, in [1847](#), with the incorporation of the northern territories of [Mexico](#) into the United States ([Mexican Cession](#)), at the end of the [Mexican American War](#). Most of the Catholics in these areas were descendants of the original settlers, dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries. However U.S. Catholics increased most dramatically and significantly in the latter half of the 19th century and the early 20th century due to a massive influx of European [immigrants](#) from [Ireland](#), [Italy](#), [Germany](#) (especially the south and west), [Austria-Hungary](#), [Italy](#), and the [Russian Empire](#) (largely [Poles](#)). Substantial numbers of Catholics also came from [French Canada](#) during the mid-19th century and settled in [New England](#). Although these ethnic groups tended to live and worship together initially, over time they intermarried so that, a century later, many Catholics are descended from more than one ethnicity.

By 1850 Roman Catholics had become the country's largest single denomination. Between 1860 and 1890 the population of Roman Catholics in the United States tripled through immigration; by the end of the decade it would reach seven million. This influx would eventually bring increased political power for the Roman Catholic Church and a greater cultural presence, led at the same time to a growing fear of the Catholic "menace."

Some anti-immigrant and [Nativism](#) movements, like the [Know Nothings](#) and the [Ku Klux Klan](#), have also been [anti-Catholic](#). Indeed for most of the history of the United States, Catholics have been persecuted. It was not until the Presidency of [John F. Kennedy](#) that Catholics lived in the U.S. free of scrutiny. The Ku Klux Klan-ridden South discriminated against Catholics for their commonly Irish, Italian, Polish, or Spanish ethnicity. Those in the Protestant Midwest and North labeled Catholics as anti-American "[Papists](#)", incapable of free thought without the approval of the [Pope](#). As the nineteenth century wore on animosity waned, most Protestant Americans came to understand that, despite [anti-Catholic](#) rhetoric, Roman Catholics were not trying to seize control of the government. Nonetheless, concerns continued into the twentieth century that there was too much "Catholic influence" on the government.

In the latter half of the 19th century, the first attempt at standardizing discipline in the American Church occurred with the convocation of the [Plenary Councils of Baltimore](#). These councils resulted in the [Baltimore Catechism](#) and the establishment of the [Catholic University of America](#). ☐

20th century

By the beginning of the 20th century, approximately one-sixth of the population of the United States was Roman Catholic. Modern Roman Catholic immigrants come to the United States from the [Philippines](#), Poland, and [Latin America](#), especially from Mexico. This [multiculturalism](#) and diversity has greatly impacted the flavor of Catholicism in the United States. For example, many dioceses serve in both the [English language](#) and the [Spanish language](#). Also, when many parishes were set up in the United States, separate churches were built for parishioners from Ireland, Germany, Italy, etc. In [Iowa](#), the development of the [Archdiocese of Dubuque](#), the work of [Bishop Loras](#) and the building of [St. Raphael's Cathedral](#) illustrate this point.

In the later 20th century "[...] the Catholic Church in the United States became the subject of controversy due to allegations of [clerical child abuse of children and adolescents](#), of episcopal negligence in arresting these crimes, and of numerous civil suits that cost Catholic dioceses hundreds of millions of dollars in damages."^[9] Because of this, higher scrutiny and governance, as well as protective policies and diocesan investigation into seminaries have been enacted to correct these former abuses of power, and safeguard parishioners and the Church from further abuses and scandals.

Modernism

Modernism in the [Roman Catholic Church](#) refers to a characterization of a broad set of theologians and their views during the late 19th and early 20th century. The so-called Catholic "modernists" did not form a cohesive group, nor did they hold a unified set of theological positions. The term was invented by the author of [Pope Pius X's](#) 1907

Encyclical [*Pascendi Dominici gregis*](#), which by broad scholarly consensus, is a caricature of the various "modernist" theologies^{[[dubious – discuss](#)]}. "Modernists" generally did not use this label in describing themselves, nor did they necessarily see themselves as a unified group. The Modernist crisis took place chiefly in French and British intellectual Catholic circles, to a lesser extent in Italy, and virtually nowhere else.^[1] The Modernist movement in Catholicism was influenced by certain [Protestant](#) theologians and clergy, starting with the [Tübingen school](#) in the mid-19th century. Some, however, such as [George Tyrrell](#), disagreed strongly with this analogy; Tyrrell saw himself as loyal to the unity of the Church, and disliked liberal Protestantism (Hales 1958). According to Church critics and dissidents of both past and present, in some respects the Church appeared to be reacting to cultural themes that had arisen with [Renaissance humanism](#) and had informed the [Enlightenment](#) of the 18th century.

Modernism in the Catholic Church might be described under the following broad headings:

- **[Rationalist](#) approach to the [Bible](#).** The [rationalism](#) that was an aspect of Modernism took a skeptical view of [miracles](#) and the [historicity](#) of biblical narratives. Furthermore, this approach attempted to evaluate the meaning of the Bible by focusing on the text alone and ignoring what the [Church fathers](#) and others have historically taught about it. This way of looking at the Bible became quite popular in the Protestant churches and found its way into Catholic churches. It was an offshoot of the concept of [sola scriptura](#), which asserts that scripture is only authoritative book of Religion, and that one can learn all things regarding salvation and a Christian life through this.
- **[Secularism](#) and other [Enlightenment](#) ideals.** The ideal of secularism can be briefly summarised as holding that the best course of action in politics and other civic fields is that which flows from disparate groups' and religions' common understanding of the "good". By implication, Church and State should be separated, and the laws of the state should generally only cover the "common ground" of beliefs between the various religious groups that might be present — for example the prohibition of murder, etc. From the secularists' point of view, it was possible to distinguish between political ideas and structures that were religious and those that were not. Catholic theologians in the mainstream argued that such a distinction was not possible, that all aspects of society had to be organized with the final goal of [heaven](#) in mind. This was a direct counter to the thread of [Humanism](#) that had been in the forefront of intellectual thought since the [Renaissance](#) and the [Scientific Revolution](#). The roots of secularism they traced to those English philosophers who attempted to create a "universal religion" based on the "common denominator" of all other religions; it was largely spread through the secret societies of the Enlightenment, including the [Freemasons](#), the [Illuminati](#), and the [Carbonari](#), and its greatest threat, in the writings of this school, was the spectre of [Democracy](#).
- **Modern [philosophical](#) systems.** Philosophers such as [Kant](#) and [Henri Bergson](#) inspired the mainstream of Modernist thought. One of the main currents was the attempt to synthesize the [vocabularies/epistemologies/metaphysics](#) and other features of certain modern systems of philosophy with Catholicism, in much the same way the Scholastics earlier attempted to synthesize [Platonic](#) and [Aristotlean](#) philosophy with Catholicism.

The combination of these three currents usually led to other conclusions which were common in various streams of progressive thinking that was characterized as Modernism:

- That religion is primarily a matter of irrational emotions. As more dispassionate and detailed studies of history appeared, a sense of [historicism](#) suggested that ideas are generally so conditioned by the age in which they are expressed; thus modernists generally believed that most dogmas or teachings of the Church were novelties which arose because of specific historical circumstances throughout the history of the Church. Rationalism and textual criticism downplayed the possible role of the miraculous, and the philosophical systems in vogue

at the time taught that the existence of [God](#) and other things could never be known (see [Agnosticism](#)). [Theology](#), formerly the “queen of the sciences” was dethroned. (Wilkinson 2002) So it was argued that religion must be primarily caused and centered on the feelings of believers. This bolsters the claims of secularism in weakening any position that supported favoring one religion over the other in the state (since if there isn’t a very scientific and reasonable assumption that one’s religion is right, it would be a much safer route to organize society based on the assumption that no particular religion is right).

Evolution of dogmas

The final overall teaching of Modernism, is that dogmas (what is taught by the Church and what its members are required to believe) can evolve over time, rather than being the same for all time. This aspect of thought was what made Modernism unique in the history of [heresies](#) in the Church. Previously, a heretic (someone who believed and taught something different from what the rest of the church believed) would either claim that he was right and the rest of the church was wrong because he had received a new revelation from God, or that he had understood the true teaching of God which was previously understood but then lost. Both of those scenarios almost necessarily led to an organizational separation away from the Church ([schism](#)) or the offender being ejected from the Church ([excommunication](#)). With this new idea that doctrines evolve, it was possible for the modernist to believe that the old teachings of the Church *and* his new seemingly contradictory teachings were both correct — each had their time and place. This system allows almost any type of new belief that the modernist might want to introduce, and for this reason Modernism was labelled the “synthesis of all heresies” by Pope Pius X.

Social/anthropological causes of Modernism

Catholic historians and theologians have social explanations as to why Modernism developed as it did and became so popular:

- Working with the modern philosophical systems was popular. It allowed theologians to work with non-Catholic philosopher contemporaries, and not to be looked down upon as “ancient” for their frequently exclusively [Scholastic](#) philosophy.
- In the Americas, especially in the [United States](#), priests, bishops and theologians were surrounded by a culture and laity committed to the concept of secularism. Anti-Catholic uprisings during the colonial period and later caused a desire for priests and bishops to “fit in” and to “prove their loyalty to the American way”. Documents such as the [Syllabus of Errors](#) (which condemned freedom of religion and separation of church and state) were largely ignored by these priests and bishops. The modernistic trend of injecting secular values into Catholicism itself would allow for a much smoother relationship in these areas. Also, some argue, the downplaying of the doctrines taught by the Church contrary to American culture led them to be virtually unknown by succeeding generations of Catholics, causing newly ordained priests and bishops almost automatically to have secularist beliefs.
- The “evolution of dogmas” theory (see [Development of doctrine](#)), much like certain interpretations of being saved *sola fide* (“by faith alone”), allows for a constant updating of standards of morality. As moral standards shifted heavily during the 20th century, previously a Catholic would have had to deny his faith to engage in some of the actions of his contemporaries. Now, by citing the theory that dogmas can change, it was possible to “update” Catholic [morality](#) while not being concerned with possible contradictions.

Official Church response

In 1893, [Pope Leo XIII](#)’s encyclical [Providentissimus Deus](#) affirmed in principle the legitimacy of Biblical criticism only insofar as it was pursued in a spirit of faith. In 1903 Leo established a Pontifical Biblical Commission to oversee those studies and ensure that they were conducted with respect for the Catholic doctrines on the inspiration and interpretation of scripture.

Pope Pius X, who succeeded Leo, was the first to identify Modernism as a movement. He frequently condemned both its aims and ideas, and was deeply concerned by the ability of Modernism to allow its adherents to believe themselves strict Catholics while having a markedly different belief as to what that meant (a consequence of the notion of evolution of dogma). In July 1907 the Holy Office published the document [*Lamentabili Sane Exitu*](#), a sweeping condemnation which distinguished sixty-five propositions as a Modernist Heresy. In September of the same year, Pius X promulgated an encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* which enjoined a compulsory [Oath Against Modernism](#) on all Catholic bishops, priests and teachers. The oath was abolished by Pope Paul VI in 1967.

To ensure enforcement of these decisions, Monsignor [Umberto Benigni](#) organized, through his personal contacts with theologians, an unofficial group of censors who would report to him those thought to be teaching condemned doctrine. This group was called the [Sodalitium Pianum](#), i.e. Fellowship of Pius (X), which in France was known as *La Sapinière*. Its frequently overzealous and clandestine methods hindered rather than helped the Church's combat against Modernism.^[2]

Since [Pope Paul VI](#), most church authorities have largely dropped the term "modernism", perhaps because it is inherently ambiguous and can possibly be confused with the [modernist](#) movement in art, instead preferring to identify more precise errors, such as [secularism](#), [liberalism](#) or [relativism](#). The term has however enjoyed a revival amongst [Traditionalists](#) and Conservative critics within the Catholic Church.