SOME of the first Pilgrims came to our distant shores as separatists who had fled to the Netherlands from England, fleeing religious persecution. Having left their homeland, they feared their English culture would be lost, and decided that the only thing to do was to set out for the New World. They journeyed on the Mayflower, setting foot on hallowed ground, and founded Plymouth Colony in 1620, one of the first of the original thirteen colonies. I remember from my grammar school history, a portrait of men with black hats, boots, and buckles, and women in their aprons and linen caps, dining together in thanksgiving with the Native Americans, finding common ground and bartering their goods. In the early founding, a peace treaty was signed between the two alliances. In reality, many violent conflicts ensued, and there was an unjust system of slavery in the settlements.

With the establishment of the colonies, millions of immigrants followed to build upon a foundation that continues to emerge today with an abundance of cultures and religions, but it has not come without formidable adversity and struggle. With the growth of the nation, we learn about the mass displacement of the indigenous inhabitants from their homes, forcing them to relocate, and accounts of genocide. Still today, Native Americans are socially and economically disadvantaged.

It was a daunting passage for Roman Catholics. Puritans regarded Catholics as inferior, with no religious rights, and the pope was considered the Anti-Christ, prompted by a declaration given by Ussher, the Reformation archbishop of England, that “to give toleration to papists was grievous sin” (quoted in “Readers Speak to Readers” by Harold Hamilton, Our Sunday Visitor, Nov. 24, 1918). When Irish Catholics began to immigrate in large numbers in 1762, they were met with overwhelming intolerance because of their Catholic faith. Their personal and religious rights were disregarded for fear of a growing allegiance to the papacy. In Massachusetts, all religions were generously accepted and permitted, except for the Roman Catholic. (James O’Donnell, The Diocese of Hartford, Rev. Boston: Hurd, 1900).

Today, we witness violence and hate crimes against Muslims and Jews. The ethnic onslaught of discrimination based simply on the color of one’s skin or country of origin portrays an overt cultural blindness. African Americans have indelibly suffered from the evils of slavery and discrimination and the fight for racial justice is engrained in those who must live it and those who want to change it. During the Depression, in the midst of food shortages and job insecurity, the most excessive restrictions were placed on Mexican immigrants. In 1931, only 3,333 entered the United States while 14,442 departed, as it appeared in the Catholic Transcript, Aug. 20, 1931, under the headline “Immigration Figures Show Large Decline...” The threat of deportation has continued in Latino, Mexican, and other communities in our current political climate.

Though the immigration struggle continues, millions who have immigrated to the United States have enjoyed freedoms, and have prospered educationally and economically in our country. I recount the story of a friend and member of my Catholic parish who came here alone, with little, from Cuba in the 1960s upon the establishment of the Cuban refugee program for those seeking asylum from a communist government and religious persecution. She made her way to American shores, joining her father in Florida, who had arrived months earlier at the home of a relative who was her sponsor. Her mother had to remain behind and not until four years later, in an effort to join her family, journeyed in a small vessel with other passengers that nearly took their lives in turbulent waters.

Later, settling in Connecticut, although she did experience some discrimination among peer groups, my friend went on to get her citizenship, pursued a college education, and became a guidance counselor, among other career pursuits in the educational field, and has enjoyed political and religious freedoms in the United States. Others have not been so fortunate, having had to face deportation, loss of businesses, and separation from family.

The Naturalization Act and Subsequent Legislation

The enactment of law and legislation has governed immigration and citizenship in a continual reevaluation and revision throughout the years. The Naturalization Act, enacted by Congress in 1790, excluded Native Americans, indentured servants, slaves, and the freed Black population, and later Asians, and a ruling determined that a woman’s citizenship was largely dependent upon her marital status. In 1819, the first legislation on immigration in the United States, known as the Steerage Act, was established in an attempt to improve conditions of cross-Atlantic travel, adding a requirement that a record of immigrants should be kept by the ship’s captain and include names of those who died during the voyage.

Between 1892 and 1924, more restrictions emerged as an influx of European immigrants, many from Central and Eastern Europe, came through Ellis Island and other American ports. Acting on national prejudices, the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 was based on a national origins quota, allowing only 2 percent of each nationality into the United States, and continuing to exclude Asian immigrants. In 1952, President Truman signed the McCarran-Walter Immigration and Nationality Act. The act abolished some restrictions of the Naturalization Act of 1979, but the establishment of the amendments were based largely on fears about communist infiltration stemming from Cold War apprehension between the United States and the Soviet Union. It also extended discrimination against other nationalities with
“They Find a Haven in America,” The Catholic World in Pictures, 9 January 1948.
The Catholic Church’s position of 1965 was then signed into law by President Johnson at the foot of the Statue of Liberty. It was amended with the inclusion of a significant provision stating, “No person shall receive any preference or priority or be discriminated against in the issuance of an immigrant visa because of the person’s race, sex, nationality, place of birth, or place of residence.” Later, the Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 raised income requirements for those attempting to enter as well as their sponsors. Under the headline, “A Meaner-Spirited Immigration Law” in the Catholic Worker (August 1, 1997), Anne Pilsbury was highly critical of the act, saying that it “great numbers of lives are at stake.” He calls for “love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance,” and refers to an episode in the life of St. Francis “that shows his openness of heart, which knew no bounds and transcended differences of origin, nationality, color or religion.”

Search Terms: immigration, emigration, immigration legislation, Native-Americans, church and immigration, Latin America immigration, European immigration, Ellis Island, Johnson-Reed, McCarran-Walter

Sources referred to in the Catholic News Archive: <thecatholicnewsarchive.org>


Catholic Transcript. April 4, 1928. Bigoted Forces Rally Against New Religious Equality…

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St. Louis Register. June 6, 1952. NCWC Urges Truman Sign McCarran Immigration Bill.


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Other newspaper resources on immigration:

La Esperanza, a national Catholic Spanish-language weekly magazine is directed toward the Mexican community. With newspaper issues from November 1929 to December 1954, it is an exceptional publication that offers a great opportunity for scholars to uncover the Spanish-speaking communities’ activities during the first half of the twentieth century.

Other resources on immigration in the Catholic Portal: <https://www.catholicresearch.org/catholic-portal>

Gilberto Cárdenas Papers, University of Notre Dame. Institute for Latino Studies.

The Cárdenas papers on Mexican Americans were collected by Gilbert Cardenas to be used for scholarly research. Cárdenas served as Director of the Institute for Latino Studies, 1999-2012, was Assistant Provost during this time and held the Samora Chair in Latino Studies, dedicated to the legendary sociologist, Julian Samora. He is Emeritus Professor of sociology, Executive Director of the Notre Dame Center for Arts and Culture, and former Fellow of the Kellogg Institute for International Studies.

Catholic Resources in Digital Form:

Catholics and Cultures / Practices and Values: Migration and Immigration. <https://catholicsandculture.org>
The first stop

By JO-ANN PRICE

NEW YORK (N.C.)—Like the millions of immigrants who thrashed its shores, New York’s Ellis Island now shows its age.

Sitting in New York harbor mute and neglected, 28 buildings in disrepair, Ellis Island — where more than half the immigrants entering this country between 1892 and 1932 were examined and processed — is this city’s newest tourist spot, attracting more than 22 million visitors since late May.

Despite $11 million appropriation by Congress to spruce it up, Ellis Island is a wreck. The paint on the building is peeling, rats abound, and the rooms have been vandalized. To restore the island would cost up to $100 million, according to present estimates.

Nevertheless, the National Park Service runs tours to the place five times a day, taking visitors to the old small boat, the G. Washington Colyer, for $1.25, and a Circle Line boat leaves Liberty Park, Jersey City, daily, except Mondays at 9:30 p.m. for the same fare. The tours will continue until Oct. 3, when Ellis Island will be up for grabs.

For some, Ellis Island was the first stop in an uncertain journey that ended with dislocation. Father Edward Flamang, founder of Boys Town, was a boy of 18 when he landed on the island in 1906 from his native Ireland. Knute Rockne, football coach at the University of Notre Dame from 1918-30, was 5 when his family emigrated from Norway in 1902. The Vrieling Family Singers from Austria were among those in the intellectual migration in 1938, escaping the wave of fascism that swept Europe.

“They took courage, a kind of courage that is outside the realm of violence and war, to burn all your bridges behind you,” a youthful Park Service ranger told a recent tour. “If you were weak or timid, you would not have done it.”

More than 110 million living Americans are said to have relatives who passed through Ellis Island. Not all the newcomers became as famous as snack writer Irving Berlin, Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, the impresario Sol Hurok, but they all had the same start — on Ellis Island.

“The immigrants used to call it the ‘Island of Tears,’ but we prefer to call it the ‘Island of Emotions,’ commented Luis E. Garcia-Curbelo, manager of the Statue of Liberty. TheIFOA was begun five years ago. ‘Quite a few come to Ellis Island with gray hair and gray grandchildren, and they tell us ‘I remember the noise’ or ‘I remember sitting on these benches. It was a place of pain and laughter and love.’ Up one flight of stairs in the main building, tourists are brought into the registry hall. Where a tape recorder reproduces the sounds of the past.

Mrs. Alice Leck, of Valley Stream, N.Y., recalled how her father, the late Charles A. Solomon, came with an uncle from Lithuania in 1912. He was fleeing from the Russian army. The uncle, as soon as he cleared immigration at Ellis Island, promptly deserted the youth for a woman, giving him $2.

“A priest got my father a job on a farm in Plattsburg,” Mrs. Leck continued. Forty years later, the uncle showed up at our home in Port Washington, N.Y. I don’t know how he found us. He had come to ask my father’s forgiveness for deserting him. He said he couldn’t do it without doing it. He was in his 80’s. My father, of course, was amazed and he gave him back his $2. And the uncle went back to Binghamton, N.Y. And he died.”

Carny priest carries ‘church’ with him

By RAY BART

MONROE, Wis. (U.S.) — Father Mac makes house calls on persons who have never been to the public than most people. In their own way, are shelterers. Magr. Robert J. McCarthy of Watertown, N.Y., is chaplain to the 100,000 people who travel with carnivals and outdoor shows.

Known as the Carny Priest, he has found that the spiritual needs of circus people are equal to those for acceptance to the public they serve. “They’re trying to live down something that started in 1902 and 1903 with roughshockers,” he explained. They regard themselves and so do they — as benefiting the towns they play but separatist from town life by the requirements of their jobs and kept apart also by the distrust which still persists.

“I carry water, wine, the holy water, candles, vestments and altar linens — my own little church — right with me,” he said. “I do counseling when I can, bless equipment and set up prayer sessions.”

At the Great Mississippi Valley Fair in Davenport, Iowa, he celebrated Mass for 100 show people in a big top, baptized a baby 100 miles from home and greeted old friends with evident pleasure. They are affectionate people. Carnies are great for sharing stuff,” he observed.

Father Mac travels back across his bridge to the general public, taking his message to the press, radio and TV through interviews. He is not shy in seeking. He wants the outside world to know that outdoor showmen “are ordinary family and business people” with the same range of needs, hopes, fears, joys and sorrows — and a great capacity for kindness and helping one another.

Red-haired and freckled-faced, as a youth, he spent several summers as a carnival talker. “At age 36, he is chaplain to several regional and national showmen’s associations while serving Holy Family Church in Watertown. He has plans in that uptown New York community for building a showmen’s chapel in connection with St. Thomas Blood Monastery whose clergymen run daily prayers for carnival people.

His work has won praise from the national conference of Catholic Bishops, whose general secretary, Bishop James S. Rausch, wrote: Without the presence of friendly and interested priests like yourself their lives could be cut off from the Lord.”

“I like to get more priests to give their time,” says the Carny Priest. Protestant clergymen has come forward to serve as chaplains to carnivals, he noted. “They are generally married and can’t travel as easily as I do.”

Magr. McCarthy visits 25 to 30 shows each season and attends the winter meetings. “He’s a great service for this business,” said Jerry Spalding, owner of Spalding Shows, Dallas, Texas.