

ARCHBISHOP CARROLL AND THE LITURGY IN THE VERNACULAR

The trend toward a more generous use of the vernacular in the liturgy has gained considerable headway of recent years in certain countries of Europe. It is a movement which has been attracting increasing attention in the United States, and in view of that fact it may be of interest to students of the liturgy to know the views once held by the father of the American hierarchy on this subject of current interest.

John Carroll himself came of old American stock, having been born at Upper Marlboro, Maryland, on January 8, 1735. By reason of the penal legislation against Catholics in colonial Maryland the only formal education he could receive in his native land was a short period of schooling in the furtive little academy at Bohemia Manor which was located in Cecil County near the Pennsylvania-Maryland border. Fortunately, the family was one of means and they were able, therefore, to send young Carroll abroad where he secured a finished education at the Jesuit schools of St. Omer and Liège, entered the Society of Jesus, was ordained a priest, and spent several years on the continent and in England as a teacher and missionary. He was thirty-nine years of age when he returned home in 1774 after an absence from his family and friends of more than a quarter of a century.¹

The young American priest arrived in the land of his birth on the eve of the revolution that would win for his country its independence. Cut off as they then were from contact with ecclesiastical superiors in England, it became necessary for the few and scattered Catholics to seek some kind of organization. After prolonged negotiations the Holy See finally named Carroll as superior of the missions of the United States. This important step in the history of the Church in America occurred on June 9, 1784.

Besieged as he was from the very outset by a multitude of problems in his efforts to bring the little Catholic flock through these critical pioneer days for both Church and State, Carroll was confronted — even before he knew of his appointment from Rome — with the very un-

¹For full biographical details cf. the two-volume work of Peter Guilday, *The Life and Times of John Carroll, Archbishop of Baltimore, 1735–1815* (New York, 1922).

pleasant duty of answering a serious attack upon Catholicism that had been made by a priest who had recently apostatized from the Church, the Maryland-born ex-Jesuit, Charles Henry Wharton. Wharton's pamphlet of nearly forty pages was published at Philadelphia in the early summer of 1784 and was entitled *A Letter to the Roman Catholics of the City of Worcester* (England) where he had been stationed for some years before his return to the United States in 1783.

The appearance of the Wharton work, polished and urbane as it was in both style and tone, made it imperative that a Catholic answer should be furnished to his attack upon the Church's doctrines, and for this task it was decided that Father Carroll was the best equipped of all the American priests of the time to provide an adequate reply. It was in no sense a congenial assignment and yet Carroll sensed the importance of the issue at stake and was at pains to outline the dangers to the integrity of faith for American Catholics if an answer were not forthcoming to Wharton. John Carroll expressed the high evaluation which he revealed all through his life on American Catholics maintaining kindly and charitable relations with their fellow citizens of other religious faiths when he said:

But even this prospect should not have induced me to engage in the controversy, if I could fear that it would disturb the harmony now subsisting amongst all christians in this country, so blessed with civil and religious liberty; which if we have the wisdom and temper to preserve, America may come to exhibit a proof to the world, that general and equal toleration, by giving a free circulation to fair argument, is the most effectual method to bring all denominations of christians to an unity of faith.²

Carroll worked hard at the job during the summer of 1784 and in the autumn of that year Frederick Green, a printer at Annapolis, brought out his brochure which was almost three times the length of Wharton's and which bore the title, *An Address to the Roman Catholics of the United States of America*. Library facilities were severely limited at that early date and among the meager sources at his command Carroll had found much helpful material in the work of the English priest, Joseph Berington, called *State and Behaviour of English Catholics from the Reformation to the Year 1780* (London, 1780). Both sides of the Wharton-Carroll controversy were widely read among interested Angli-

² A Catholic Clergyman [John Carroll], *An Address to the Roman Catholics of the United States of America* (Annapolis, 1784), p. 114.

cans and Catholics in England during the next few years. The English Catholics were at that time still under the heavy pressure of the penal laws of earlier years to which the Catholic relief act of June, 1778, had only opened a faint prospect of future remedy.

Several years after the appearance of his answer to Wharton the American superior expressed to Berington the admiration he had for the latter's book and suggested further subjects for the pen of the gifted English priest who by this time had attained considerable fame by his able, if at times unconventional, writings.

It was in the course of this letter — undated but from internal evidence known to have been written in 1787 — that there occurred a strong plea for the liturgy in the vernacular. Carroll stated that in his judgment the two principal obstacles to a proper understanding of Catholicism by Protestants were the character and extent of the spiritual jurisdiction of the Holy See and the use of the Latin language in the liturgy. He then told Berington:

With respect to the latter point, I cannot help thinking that the alteration of the Church discipline ought not only to be solicited, but insisted on as essential to the service of God and benefit of mankind. Can there be anything more preposterous than for a small district containing in extent no more than Mount Libanus and a trifling territory at the foot of it, to say nothing of the Greeks, Armenians, Coptics, etc., to have a "liturgy" in their proper idiom and on the other hand for an immense extent of Countries containing G.B., Ireland, also N. Am., the W. Indies etc. to be obliged to perform divine service in an unknown tongue; and in this country either for want of books or inability to read, the great part of our congregations must be utterly ignorant of the meaning and sense of the publick offices of the Church. It may have been prudent, for aught I know, to refuse a compliance in this instance with the insulting and reproachful demands of the first reformers; but to continue the practice of the Latin liturgy in the present state of things must be owing either to chimerical fears of innovation or to indolence and inattention in the first pastors of the national Churches in not joining to solicit or indeed ordain this necessary alteration.³

This striking statement was so much in sympathy with Berington's own views on the question that he took the liberty of publicizing it in the controversy in which he was then engaged with his superior, John

³ Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Special C, C-1, Carroll to Berington Baltimore [1787], copy. The version of this letter in Guilday, *op. cit.*, I, 130, differs in a number of particulars from the original copy.

Douglass, Vicar Apostolic of the London District. As a consequence Carroll received letters of protest against the stand he had taken from several quarters in the British Isles where there then existed rather grave tension between conflicting groups within the Catholic body.⁴ Among those who deprecated his opinions on the liturgy in the vernacular were John Thomas Troy, O.P., Archbishop of Dublin, who informed Carroll that he had written a pastoral letter of some sixty pages against the proposal, and Arthur O'Leary, O.F.M., chaplain to the Spanish Embassy in London and a famous controversialist of the period.

But John Carroll was not a man to be easily frightened or dissuaded from his views. He replied to O'Leary's strictures on his criticism of Pope Clement XIV for having suppressed the Jesuits and for his opinions on the liturgy, and in acknowledging that he had used Berington's book in preparing his reply to Wharton, Carroll then informed the Franciscan:

In a letter to him [Berington] and before I had a thought of ever being in my present station, I expressed a wish that the pastors of the Church would see cause to grant to this extensive continent jointly with England and Ireland, etc. the same privilege as is enjoyed by many churches of infinitely less extent; that of having their liturgy in their own language; for I do indeed conceive that one of the most popular prejudices against us is that our public prayers are unintelligible to our hearers. Many of the poor people, and the negroes generally, not being able to read, have no technical help to confine their attention.

But being the true realist that he was Carroll made it plain to O'Leary that Berington had attributed to him projects in the United States which far exceeded his powers, projects in which, as he candidly added, "I should find no co-operation from my clerical brethren in America, were I rash enough to attempt their introduction upon my own authority."⁵

Meanwhile, of course, Father Berington was delighted with Carroll's broad approach to the question of the liturgy and other matters discussed in their correspondence, and in a letter of March, 1788, he remarked that for some time they had been hearing in England that he was designed for what he called "the American Mitre," although a recent report had it that the rumor was premature. He was sorry if it

⁴For the internal strife among the Catholics of Great Britain and Ireland during the 1780's cf. Bernard Ward, *The Dawn of the Catholic Revival in England, 1781-1803*, 2 volumes (London, 1909), *passim*, and the briefer account in David Mathew, *Catholicism in England, 1535-1935* (London, 1936), pp. 136-158.

⁵Carroll to O'Leary, Baltimore, undated, cited in Guilday, *op. cit.*, I, 131.

should turn out that Carroll was not to be the first American bishop, for, as he said, "With your liberality of mind, we had every reason to know, that the Catholic Church of the United States would have been raised on proper foundations."⁶ But the report that had circulated among the English Catholics about Carroll was at length verified and on November 6, 1789, Pope Pius VI erected the Diocese of Baltimore and named John Carroll as its first ordinary. He was consecrated by Bishop Charles Walmesley, O.S.B., at Lulworth Castle, one of the estates of the wealthy English Catholic, Thomas Weld, on August 15, 1790, and after some weeks spent among his English friends the new bishop returned to his immense charge at the close of that year.

After he had attended to the most pressing problems demanding his attention Carroll sent out a call to the priests to assemble at Baltimore on November 7, 1791, for the first synod of the infant diocese. He was in session with his twenty-two priests for four days and on November 10 they drew up the regulations which should govern the carrying out of the ceremonies and offices of the Church for Sundays and the principal feast days of the ecclesiastical year.

In the synod of November, 1791, the advanced position assumed by Carroll in his correspondence of 1787–1788 with Berington and O'Leary on the subject of a vernacular liturgy was greatly modified. Whether or not he made any attempt during the synod to implement his ideas of earlier years, we have no way of knowing. In all likelihood the realization of his lack of power to decide such matters without reference to the Holy See, plus the fine balance and common sense which never seemed to fail Carroll during his long and eventful life, prompted him to pass over the question until a more propitious time.

At any rate, among the synodal rules it was specified that at Masses on Sundays and feast days the gospel of the day should be read in the vernacular, but that was the only mention made of it here. At afternoon vespers benediction of the Blessed Sacrament was ordered with a catechetical instruction to follow, and in this connection it was added, "*Optandum est ut inter officia hymni aliqui aut preces lingua vernacula cantentur* — It is desirable that some hymns or prayers be sung in the mother tongue during the services."⁷ In cases where there was but a

⁶ Berington to Carroll, Oscot near Birmingham, March 27, 1788, quoted in Guilday, *op. cit.*, I, 132.

⁷ *Concilia provincialia Baltimori habita ab anno 1829 usque ad annum 1849* (Baltimore, 1851), p. 20.

single priest to carry out all the ceremonies it was prescribed that after he had heard confessions and completed preparations for Mass there should be recited either the litany of the Holy Name or of Loretto — unless the choir should wish to sing in the “*linguâ vernaculâ*.” After Mass the whole congregation was to recite, once more in the vernacular, the Lord’s prayer, the Hail Mary, the Apostles’ Creed, and the acts of faith, hope, and charity.⁸ These were the only references to the liturgical use of English in the synodal decrees.

Seventeen years after this first diocesan synod of the United States, on April 8, 1808, Rome raised the premier see to the status of the Archdiocese of Baltimore with suffragan sees at New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Bardstown. The interval had witnessed grave disturbances and dangers to the unity and integrity of faith among the American Catholics by reason of the abuses of lay trusteeism and the clash of rival national groups within the Church. Therefore, when the consecration ceremonies of the new bishops were held at Baltimore in late October and early November, 1810, Archbishop Carroll took the occasion of the prelates’ presence in his see city for a series of conferences with his coadjutor bishop, Leonard Neale, and the three suffragans, John Cheverus of Boston, Michael Egan, O.F.M., of Philadelphia, and Benedict J. Flaget, S.S., of Bardstown, in order that they might offer some remedy to the situation.

That there had arisen differences in practice, insofar as the use of the vernacular in the liturgy was concerned, was evident by the regulations enacted by the bishops at this time, for among them there was found the following:

It is being made known to the Archbishop and Bishops that there exists a difference of opinion and practice among some of the clergy of the United States concerning the use of the vernacular language in any part of the public service, and in the administration of the Sacraments. It is hereby enjoined on all Priests not only to celebrate the whole Mass in the Latin language, but likewise when they administer Baptism, the Holy Eucharist, Penance and Extreme Unction, to express the necessary and essential form of those Sacraments in the same tongue according to the Roman ritual; but it does not appear contrary to the injunctions of the Church to say in the vernacular language the prayers previous and subsequent to those Sacred forms, provided however, that no translation of those prayers shall be made use of except one authorized by the concurrent approbation of the Bishops of this ecclesi-

⁸ *Ibid.*

astical Province, which translation will be printed as soon as it can be prepared under their inspection. In the meantime the translation of the late venerable Bishop Challoner may be made use of.⁹

The various manifestations of the mind of John Carroll on the subject of the liturgy in the vernacular between 1787 and 1810 provide an interesting insight into a minor aspect of the life of the first Archbishop of Baltimore. The liberal attitude which he displayed in his letters to clerical correspondents in England as superior of the American missions during the late 1780's gave way before the practical difficulties which he encountered after he had assumed the episcopal character. We find, therefore, that the regulations of the synod of 1791, over which he presided as bishop, permitted only a very limited use of the vernacular. And by 1810 the harassed Archbishop of Baltimore was so plagued by administrative problems of all kinds arising within his ecclesiastical province that he joined with his fellow bishops in November of that year in discountenancing the abuses that had appeared in the form of unwarranted use of the vernacular by priests in some parts of the country, even in the celebration of the Mass.¹⁰

No American churchman of that age could be found who would more quickly frown upon practices of this kind without the proper permission of the Holy See than John Carroll. Yet had he lived in a more disciplined age, when he might have moved forward on this question without the danger of giving further rein to unruly trustees, rebellious priests, and quarreling nationalist groups within the American Church, it is safe to say that Archbishop Carroll would have been in the vanguard of any movement to bring the sublime offices of the Church closer to the faithful and to those outside the fold by having as much as possible of the liturgical services performed in a language which they fully understood.

⁹ The volume cited above contains the synodal regulations of 1791, but only "*quidam ex articulis*" from the disciplinary rules of the hierarchy's meeting in 1810 (pp. 25-28), and that on the vernacular is not among them. The passage quoted in the text has been taken from Guilday, *op. cit.*, II, 592.

¹⁰ But these modifications should not cause one to lose sight of the important fact that the regulations issued in 1810 by Carroll and his suffragans imply permission for priests to employ a maximum of English in administering the sacraments. In fact, the bishops seemingly took for granted in 1810 something for which many students of the liturgy have been pleading for a long time, namely, the use of the vernacular in all aspects of sacramental administration except the words embodying the essential forms of the sacrament.