

# Protestants were not the only pilgrims in America

In 1946, to describe the unique ties that bind the US and Britain together, Winston Churchill coined the phrase "a special relationship."

While mostly used in the context of security, politics, diplomacy and defence, there is an even more special relationship when it comes to the Christian Faith that unites our two nations.

Famously, in 1620 the Pilgrim Fathers set sail from Plymouth to the New World, animated by an uncompromising belief in Holy Scripture and a desire for religious freedom.

They risked everything sailing on ships like the Mayflower to begin new lives, in a new place, where they pledged to try, in the way they lived and worked, to put their ideals into practice. They came from a Protestant tradition that had often been circumscribed, at best, and persecuted, at worst.

Less well known are America's Catholic Pilgrim Fathers, their connection to England's Sacred County of Lancashire and, today, to the Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst.

Like the Mayflower settlers their journeys also had their origins in persecution. In the 17th century,

anti-Catholic laws in England, and its colonies, meant that families striving to remain true to their beliefs had to send their boys to Continental Europe for an education.

This was despite the brave attempt by George Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore, a Catholic, who had founded Maryland in 1632 as a haven for all denominations to escape persecution.

His valiant attempts to create toleration and religious freedom were, sadly, eclipsed by bigots determined to stop Catholics from securing a Catholic education.

Families like the Calverts and the Carrolls sent their boys from America to the Jesuit English College at St Omers, later re-established in Lancashire at Stonyhurst.

During those troubled years 130 American boys received a Jesuit education and 46 became priests. They laid the foundations of the Church in America as John Carroll became the first American Catholic Bishop, as Bishop of Baltimore, and founder of Georgetown University.

Bishop Carroll's prayer for the President and Congress asked for divine wisdom that laws and government would "tend to the



St Cecilia, above, and detail from the Lucca Chasuble at Stonyhurst, below

preservation of peace, the promotion of national happiness, the increase of industry, sobriety, useful knowledge and the blessing of equal liberty" - a prayer that has contemporary application.

Right up to, and even after, the War of Independence, these remarkable young pioneers were joined by young women, making the same arduous journeys to Europe: 48 entered religious life.

St Omers-Stonyhurst was the fertile soil in which these young saplings of America's Catholic Church had their roots.

But, as the Collections held in the recently restored museum at Stonyhurst's Christian Heritage Centre reveal, the story doesn't end there. Catholic Pilgrim Fathers would become Founding Fathers.

The Carrolls, who became America's most wealthy family, had sent 10 of their boys for their education. In 1764, with revolution in the air, one of them, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, returned to America. Two years later he travelled to Canada with Benjamin Franklin to seek support for the revolution.

After meeting General Washington Carroll convinced the Maryland Convention that Independence was the future.

He became the only Catholic signatory to the American Declaration of Independence and used his considerable wealth to support Washington.

Carroll was elected to the first US Senate and, having denounced



slavery as "a great evil", he became President of a Society committed to its abolition.

One particular exhibit in the restored museum illustrates the importance of the Christian Faith in the formation of these Catholic Pilgrim Fathers.

While still a boy at school, Charles Carroll composed a poem which he publicly declaimed. It is impossible to study that manuscript without becoming acutely aware of the common Christian heritage and beliefs that underpin our special US-UK relationship.

In 1754, as the young Carroll read out his poem *Almachius Tyrannus ad S Caecilian*, on the feast of

St Cecilia, he reminded his audience of the nature of religious persecution in the fifth century. But, as he recalled the price that had been paid in Rome, this was also a coded way of protesting against the persecution of his own Catholic community.

Carroll records how Almachius offers the girl, Cecilia her freedom if only she will disavow the folly of her Christian faith.

Almachius tries to flatter the girl by telling her that he could not remain unmoved by her "nobility, by the unspoiled flower of your age, by your beauty, the envy of the Gods." He urges her to resist an "untimely death, live longest, live, happy and blest, for you and yours... spare a thought for your beauty... you fly from real blessings, blessings unreal you chase."

Having failed to tempt her, Almachius tries to frighten Cecilia warning of "scorching flame" and how the "red hot metal screams".

Finally, he tells her to pretend to conform to the pagan ways whilst keeping her Christian beliefs secret and concealed. Do this and "A sure rescue will come, pleasure that will be free of bitterness, and joys that will never be snatched away".

Like many of Carroll's own contemporaries Cecilia refused to comply and followed her young husband and brother-in-law to a martyr's death.

Today, in places where Christians and others are persecuted, from Syria to North Korea, Nigeria to China, Charles Carroll's boyhood poem about St Cecilia resonates and challenges our indifference.

Stonyhurst's Christian Heritage Centre has given a copy of Carroll's poem to the Librarian of the US Congress, to keep with Carroll's other papers. The original was viewed last year, in Washington DC, at an Exhibition staged by the Knights of Columbus and the Christian Heritage Centre.

Whether it is the Carrolls, or, in later centuries, Thomas Francis Meagher (Irish patriot and Governor of Montana), George Herbert Walker (Walker Cup and grandfather of President George HW Bush), Lt Gen Vernon "Dick" Waters (recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom and President Reagan's most trusted envoy), and many others, Churchill's Special Relationship is vividly exemplified by the stories and lives of those connected with these remarkable Collections.

Today, the example of the Pilgrim Fathers, the Founding Fathers, and men and women who have given their gifts and their lives in the service of others is being turned into Christian Leadership Formation programmes.

These programmes, along with opportunities to access the historic Collections or go on a retreat to recharge batteries, by walking or cycling in the Ribbles Valley's beautiful countryside, will be central to Theodore House, as will an understanding of the Special Relationship. For details, visit: <http://www.christianheritagecentre.com/theodore-house/>



Pupils being taken to St Omers c1675, in a drawing by Agnes Treherne