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Shannon A. Stillmun March 25, 2016

“That crisis served to try women’s hearts”: Nuns and the Protection of Irish Catholicism in Philadelphia and Boston, 1829-1900

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Abstract

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Over the course of the nineteenth-century, many Catholic institutions were founded in the cities of Philadelphia and Boston. These institutions, including convents and orphan asylums, served the purpose of fighting against vehement anti-Catholic and anti-Irish violence in the American mainstream. Catholic women who felt called to a life of service to God and seeking to devote their lives to good works could join a convent, a community of Catholic religious women. Convents drew in thousands of women in the United States over the course of the nineteenth century. Nuns staffed Catholic schools, hospitals, and orphan asylums. In their capacity as caretakers nuns protected children against the violence of anti-Catholic, nativist outrage, outrage which often utilized rhetoric that victimized these very women and in doing so helped preserve Catholicism in America. This paper will portray the climate of hostility that existed in the cities of Boston and Philadelphia toward immigrants of Catholic and specifically Irish-Catholic descent. I will place women religious at the center of that conflict both as objects appropriated to suit anti-Catholic narratives and as actors uniquely situated to combat that anti-Catholicism. Lastly, I hope to provide concrete examples of how nuns protected and propagated the physical and spiritual well-being of America's Catholic population by raising, educating, and safeguarding the children of those cities.

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"That crisis served to try women's hearts": Nuns and the Protection of Irish Catholicism in Philadelphia and Boston, 1829-1900

Shannon A. Stillmun

In 1829, St. John's Orphan Asylum opened its doors to the orphaned Catholic children of Philadelphia. It was the second Catholic orphanage in the city, and the need for its foundation was a matter of grave urgency for Philadelphia Catholics. As stated in a report from the asylum's Board of Managers in 1838, "there remained no shelter for them [Catholic orphans] except the Asylum connected to the Alms-House; and to place Catholic children there, was and still is invariably at the expense of their religion." The report goes on to the state that the community "resolved to exert every nerve to supply the deficiency and to obtain for these children a resting place, where their faith should not be torn from them."[1] In the mid-nineteenth century there was a real fear among American Catholics that their religion might be "torn from them," a result of the vehement anti-Catholic sentiment rampant among mainstream Protestant Americans. If Catholic orphans were placed in secular asylums they would be, more often than not, converted to Protestantism. Therefore, other arrangements were made for children who the Catholic community feared ran the risk of losing their religion and their culture, a culture threatened by violence and prejudice. In the wake of an influx of working-class, poverty-stricken masses of Catholics from Ireland, children with deceased parents or parents without the wherewithal to care for them flooded the orphan asylums of urban America. St. John's Orphan Asylum, as the second home for Catholic boys in Philadelphia, was opened when the first coed orphan asylum became so quickly overrun.

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[1] William Whelan, *Report of the Board of Managers of the St. John's Orphan Asylum for the year 1838*, 1839, 18. In St. John's Orphan Asylum printed material, box IC0125, The Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center Archives, Wynnewood.

The United States at the start of the nineteenth century was a relatively new nation, anxious to establish a national identity and full of rising religious fervor. What resulted was a distinctly Protestant ideal for the American citizen: he was a fierce individualist, loyal only to his country. Many Americans, who called themselves Nativists, therefore, viewed Catholic immigrants, who came to U.S. in this century in the largest numbers from Ireland, with suspicion as outsiders unwilling to assimilate to American culture, and loyal to the Pope in Rome. Some even went as far as to claim an international Catholic conspiracy: the Pope's ultimate goal was to overthrow the U.S. government. The companion to the good Protestant American citizen was his devout Protestant wife. She was, by nature, the more pious of the two, her sphere of influence was the home, and her most important job was to raise her children to be faithful Protestant Christians and good American citizens. In their role as domestics, Protestant women were on the front lines of reproducing American culture and identity rooted in Protestantism. Many mainstream, white Protestant women navigated the boundaries of domesticity by founding charities and participating in activism often through their church, their actions legitimized by their faith.

Catholic laywomen could not as easily navigate these boundaries. For one, most did not have the time. A large number of Catholic immigrant and first-generation Irish-American women became in America the primary breadwinners for their families.[2] The class standings of white Protestant women allowed for the time to pursue charitable endeavors, while working class women were not afforded the same luxury. Additionally, those who did attempt to enter the realm of activism found themselves barred from mainstream movements, constantly needing to combat widespread anti-Catholicism. Catholicism, however, gave women with the desire to

[2] Paula M Kane, *Separatism and Subculture: Boston Catholicism, 1900-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 149.

participate in activism and reform an option that did not exist in Protestant denominations. Catholic women who felt called to a life of service to God and seeking to devote their lives to good works could join a convent, a community of Catholic religious women. Convents drew in thousands of women in the United States over the course of the nineteenth century. Between 1790 and 1830, twelve communities were established in the U.S.; by 1900 one hundred and six new communities joined them, with some 40,340 women in their ranks.[3] Nuns staffed Catholic schools, hospitals, and orphan asylums. They provided vulnerable Catholic children access to shelter, food, medicine, and perhaps most crucially to the recreation of Catholic culture in America, a Catholic education and upbringing. While mainstream white Protestants actively, sometimes violently, attempted to propagate an American identity that was Protestant, nuns played a vital role in protecting and maintaining Catholic culture in the hostile American landscape. Children became the battleground where Catholicism in America would either thrive or be crushed by Protestantism. Nuns in their capacity as caretakers protected children against the violence of anti-Catholic, nativist outrage, outrage which often utilized rhetoric that victimized these very women and in doing so helped preserve Catholicism in America.

This paper will portray the climate of hostility that existed in the cities of Boston and Philadelphia toward immigrants of Catholic and specifically Irish-Catholic descent. I will place women religious at the center of that conflict both as objects appropriated to suit anti-Catholic narratives and as actors uniquely situated to combat that anti-Catholicism. Lastly, I hope to provide concrete examples of how nuns protected and propagated the physical and spiritual well-being of America's Catholic population by raising, educating, and safeguarding the children of those cities.

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[3] Karen Kennelly, ed., *American Catholic Women: A Historical Exploration* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 24-25.

Nativism and the Problem Irish

The nineteenth century was a time of exceptional unrest in Philadelphia and Boston, marked by rapid industrialization and an influx of immigrants, particularly Roman Catholics from Ireland. Historian Margaret M. Mulrooney splits nineteenth-century Irish immigration to American into three distinct periods: 1800-1844, 1845 to 1855, and 1856 to 1900.[4] In the early part of the century, immigration from Ireland to the United States consisted of a mix of Protestant and Catholic people, but by 1830s "the increasing impact of commercialization and Anglicanization throughout Ireland" drove more and more Catholics to abandon their traditional way of life for America.[5] During the Great Famine in Ireland, which began in 1845, even more poor Irish, mostly from the Catholic lower-class, flocked to American shores. By 1860 the Irish accounted for over half of the 2.2 million Catholics in the United States.[6] One figure claims that 1.8 million Irish sought refuge in North America during the famine.[7] In Boston, the Irish "accounted for almost half of the total increase in the state's population" between 1850 and 1855.[8] The third period of immigration spanned from the end of the famine to the end of the century, and although immigration stalled during the Civil War, numbers rose again after the war to as many as 72,000 per year.[9] After New York City, which had a population of 275,156 Irish-born citizens, Philadelphia and Boston had the largest Irish-born populations in the United

[4] Margaret M. Mulrooney, ed., *Fleeing the Famine: North America and Irish Refugees, 1845-1851* (United States: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 23.
[5] Ibid., 24.
[6] Maureen Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion: Irish Catholic Nuns and the Origins of the Welfare System, 1830-1920* (United States: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 20.
[7] James T. Fisher, *Communion of Immigrants: A History of Catholics in America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 43.
[8] Thomas H. O'Connor, *The Boston Irish: A Political History* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 70.
[9] Mulrooney, *Fleeing the Famine*, 25.

States: by 1890 Philadelphia had 110,935 Irish-born citizens, making up 11 percent of the city's population and Boston had 71,441, making up 16 percent.[10] If counting those born to Irish mothers, the numbers rise even higher. For example, New York in 1890 had 600,000 residents of Irish descent in addition to the number of residents born in Ireland.[11] Many of Philadelphia's Catholic institutions were founded during this century. In 1830, Philadelphia had four Catholic Churches, and by 1843 the Irish-born Bishop of Philadelphia Francis Kenrick had opened nine more, a sign of the growing need for Catholic institutions. Run initially by the Sisters of Charity, St. John's Orphan Asylum was founded in 1829. In 1847, the Sisters of St. Joseph founded an order in Philadelphia and took over the care of St. John's. The Catholic Home for Destitute Children was established in 1863 to "prevent the proselytizing of Catholic children and to provide for the orphans of Catholic soldiers killed in the Civil War."[12] In the archdiocese of Boston St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum opened in 1833 and the Association for the Protection of Destitute Roman Catholic Children in 1864.[13]In the late 1860s into the 1870s, the Sisters of Charity, Sisters of Notre Dame, and Sisters of Mercy each opened homes for children in Boston.[14]

The growth of immigrant Catholic communities aggravated the distrust of foreigners and particularly of Catholics harbored by many in the wider American public. As Maureen Fitzgerald explains, the mid-nineteenth century was a defining moment for hegemonic "American" culture,

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[10] Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 142.
[11] Ibid., 142.
[12] *The Story of Philadelphia's Catholic Home for Orphan Girls, 1863-1926*, 1926, 7, The Sisters of St. Joseph Archives, Chestnut Hill College, Chestnut Hill.
[13] *Annual Report of the Association for the Protection of Destitute Roman Catholic Children in Boston, from January 1,1865 to January 1, 1866* in St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum Corporation Records, 1842-1895, Boston Archdiocesan Archives, Braintree.
[14] Robert H. Lord, John E.Sexton, and Edward T. Harrington, *The History of the Archdiocese of Boston Volume III, 1866-1943* (Boston: Pilot Publishing Company, 1945), 18.

which linked "the nation's survival with a democratic impulse born of and sustained through Protestant theology."[15] "Catholic" quickly came to be considered the antithesis of American because to be American was to be Protestant: a delineation that both united Protestant Americans against Catholics and united Irish Catholics against Protestants. A pamphlet published in Boston in 1890 titled *The Past Present and Future of the Roman Catholic Irish in New England* makes very plain the sort of opinions Americans held about the Irish in their country. The author, writing under the pseudonym "Uncle Sam Jr.," referred to the Irish in extremely negative terms, revealing his nativist agenda. "The majority of them," he wrote of the Irish living in Boston in the 1830s "were paupers, dirty and filthy, and were at this time looked upon by the native Yankee much the same as they are considered by decent people of the present time [1890], as representatives of the scum of the earth."[16] Without any real evidence to support him, he claimed "ninety percent of all our paupers, thieves, robbers, and murderers, which fill our almshouses, houses of correction, and State's prisons in New England are of this Roman Catholic Irish descent" and "ninety-five percent of all the tramps of the present day are Irish Roman Catholics."[17] Uncle Sam Jr. was adamant that "it is the general verdict of every respectable man in New England, that the representatives of this accursed nation," by which he meant Ireland, "are the worst that have ever set foot upon New England's shores."[18] His views, of course are not representative of how the Irish in America actually were and more how they were perceived by Americans searching for a scapegoat

By contrast, Uncle Sam Jr. held the common Protestant man in the highest regard, even, or maybe especially, when his actions were at the expense of their Irish neighbors. For example,

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[15] Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion*, 22.
[16] *The Past Present and Future of the Roman Catholic Irish in New England* pamphlet by Uncle Sam Jr., 1890, Box 1890, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, 7.
[17] Ibid., 7 and 11.
[18] Ibid., 9.

he describes with much pride the actions of a group of men who burned down a Charlestown, Massachusetts convent for Ursuline nuns in 1834. In 1832, a young woman named Rebecca Reed spread a story about how she had escaped the Ursuline convent. Her claims that she had been abused and mistreated in the convent and kept there against her will enraged the community. The night after minister Lyman Beecher preached on "The Devil and the Pope of Rome," a group of drunken rioters targeted the convent. The homes of several Irish Americans were burned alongside the convent, an event that was lauded by nativists like Uncle Sam, Jr.

"The blood that coursed in the veins of those men," he proclaimed, "was the same quality as that which coursed in that of their fathers at Bunker Hill, but a few years before, and the same as that which coursed in those landed on Plymouth Rock some centuries previous to the time that they were assembled."[19] Drawing a direct line from major American historical events to the events of nativist violence, Uncle Sam directly correlated the actions of violent anti-Catholic rioters with the very foundations of the country. For him and many who considered themselves true, native-born Americans, the American character was a distinctly Protestant one, and those of foreign lands and foreign religions were a danger to the very ideals they held most dear. Historian Dale T. Knobel argues "the popular stereotype of the Famine Irish that circulated in antebellum print culture - and very likely in oral culture, too - had at least as much to do with the native-born, Anglo-American Protestants' image of themselves as it had to do with perceptions of the immigrant Irish."[20] In the early nineteenth century the United States as a nation was still fairly new and its citizens were attempting to define their idea of a national identity. The American ideal, according to the mainstream Protestant understanding, emphasized "the

[19] Ibid., 6.
[20] Knobel, Dale T. "'Celtic Exodus': The Famine Irish, Ethnic Stereotypes, and the Cultivation of American Racial Nationalism." In *Fleeing the Famine: North America and Irish Refugees, 1845-1851,* edited by Margaret M. Mulrooney, 79-96. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003.

incorruptibility of the proper American citizen, the citizen so independent in both means and opinion that he could be dominated by no patron, economic or ideological."[21] By this definition, Nativists deemed the Irish unsuitable for American citizenship due to their dependency, on priests, on the Pope, and on the very nation of Britain. Uncle Sam Jr.'s pamphlet can been viewed as part warning, part rallying cry to the good Protestant people of the United States: " be more watchful of these Jesuits," it declared, "more especially of those with this accursed Irish blood in their veins, who are at present being educated, in Jesuit colleges, from one end of the land to the other for future mischief. Let every true American remember that 'Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.'"[22]

Navigating a society where they were unwanted could be difficult for many of America's Catholics. In a book titled *Advice to Irish girls in America, by the nun of Kenmare*, written in 1872, Irish Catholic nun Sister Mary Francis Clare advised young girls how to behave when faced with the trouble of working in a Protestant household. The chapter called "Advice About Some Points of Controversy Between Catholics and Protestants" outlined most of the major religious disputes between Catholicism and Protestantism and suggested ways for Catholic girls to deal with what the nun made to seem like near constant scrutiny by Protestants. Sister Mary Francis Clare's concerns were not unwarranted. Misunderstandings about what Catholicism actually entailed abounded in the Protestant mainstream. Uncle Sam Jr. called Irishmen "ignorant, superstitious, and cowardly" and believed that "to steal from a heretic was no sin according to their creed."[23] In addressing the contention Protestants had about Catholics' supposed worship of saints, Sister Mary Francis attacks the correlation Protestants draw between

[21] Ibid., 82.
[22] Uncle Sam Jr., *Roman Catholic Irish in New England,* 2.
[23] Uncle Sam Jr., *Roman Catholic Irish in New England,* 5 and 15.

Catholics and non-Christian faiths: "It is therefore silly and unmeaning for Protestants to talk as if we worshipped saints as the heathen worship false gods."[24]

Bitterness towards Catholics extended beyond the realm of religious difference. Issues of economics and labor sparked ire in the hearts of many nativist Americans. Between 1837 and 1844, the United States experienced a severe economic downturn.[25] Out of work, many Protestant nativists pointed to the Irish-Catholics in their midst as scapegoats. Complaints abounded that the Irish would work for far less than any respectable American, pushing the native-born out of work. During the period of the Industrial Revolution, the Irish made up the vast majority of the cheap, unskilled labor force. In his pamphlet, Uncle Sam Jr. waxes on about this phenomenon, looking to the industrial town of Lowell as an exemplar of it. The influx of female Irish wage workers in Lowell, to him, meant the end of honest labor for hard-working American women. In his own words: "one after another were these young American women crowded out to make room for the low-priced female McGinty scabs, until to-day the native American female wage-earner in the mills is as scarce as cherries in winter."[26] Over the century, Irish Catholics came to dominate the American labor movement, founding national labor unions such as the Knights of Labor, led by the son of Irish immigrants, which had 750,000 members by the mid-1880s, and which Uncle Sam Jr. alleged had "the intention of controlling all of the industrial trades to the exclusion of other nationalities."[27]

Even while the Irish dominated America's labor force, stereotypes about the Irish perpetuated a belief that they were lazy. "But with the Irish bogtrotter came the shirks," writes Uncle Sam Jr., "and the boss came into fashion; and any observing person can see that the Irish

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[24] Cusack, *Advice for Irish Girls*, 188.
[25] Kenny, *The American Irish*, 81.
[26] Uncle Sam Jr., *Roman Catholic Irish in New England*, 12.
[27] Kenny, *The American Irish*, 112; Uncle Sam Jr., *Roman Catholic Irish in New England*, 10.

children of that day, who are the common day laborers on our streets and elsewhere of to-day, came honestly, or, in other words, have inherited their sires' labor-shirking qualities to perfection."[28] In the American imagination, the Irish were defined by an aversion to work, a love of drink, and an aggressive penchant for fights.

The demonization of the Irish justified and legitimized much of the way nineteenth century mainstream social work was done. Protestant reformers created "placing out" programs for the children of working class families who were not able to provide for them. Because Protestant morality was based on the nuclear family, the idea was to send these young children to good American families out West, so that those families could raise responsible, American citizens and thus reproduce the Protestant ideal American culture. The focus, for Protestant reformers, was solely on "saving" the child as opposed to parental rights. The American Female Guardian Society (AFGS) out of New York, for example, championed policies that "transferred the right to mother from immigrant women to themselves."[29] They petitioned for a state truancy law, passed in 1853, which provided the legal basis for child removal. This law "allowed any citizen, and commanded any police officer, to arrest a child on the street during school hours" and take them to a mission run by the AFGS where the workers there had no obligation to contact the child's parents and where the child could potentially be committed to a Protestant institution for the rest of his or her minority.[30]

Protestant reforms of this nature were rooted in a so-called "scientific" approach to charity, an approach that differentiated between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. Children were deserving poor, and they could easily be converted to the Protestant way of life, while their impoverished parents were "undeserving." Part of the Protestant understanding was that anyone

[28] Uncle Sam Jr., *Roman Catholic Irish in New England*, 9-10.
[29] Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion*, 85.
[30] Ibid, 86.

could succeed in America, should they work hard and apply themselves. Immigrant parents, therefore, were undeserving of Protestant charity because their poverty was of their own doing and providing them with charity would disincentivize them to work.

In Philadelphia, the most violent iterations of these kinds of anti-Catholic feelings culminated in riots in the summer of 1844. In May of that year, American-born Protestant nativists rallied against perceived Catholic threats to their liberties. The issues at stake were both religious and economic in nature. The religious issue centered on what was known as "the school question."[31] Catholics in America faced near-constant condemnation for the way they educated their children. The American Catholic Church created parochial schools for the instruction of Catholic children in response to concerns about the education children would receive in the public school system. Protestant school teachers in public schools made children sing Protestant hymns and read from the King James version of the Bible, to which many Catholics objected. In 1844, a Catholic member of the school board in the Kensington district of Philadelphia "ordered an immediate suspension to Bible-reading in public schools."[32] Meanwhile, the existence of Catholic schools, staffed in large part by nuns from Ireland, outraged nativists. As historian Kevin Kenny writes "Why, the nativists wanted to know, were public schools not good enough for Irish immigrants?"[33] Women's rights advocate Mary A. B. Maher gave an address at the World's Congress of Representative Women in Chicago in May of 1893 called "the Catholic woman as an Educator" addressing some of these critiques. "The church asks a fullness of education that the state alone does not give," she claimed, so it was necessary to provide

[31] Kathleen Sprows Cummings, *New Women of the Old Faith: Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 103.
[32] Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 149.
[33] Kenny, *The American Irish*, 78.

Catholic children with an alternate education, presided over by women.[34] Nuns staffed nearly all parochial schools during this period; therefore the education of Catholic children was almost entirely in their hands. Maher argued for the strength of Catholic education: "although, in places where the odds are strong against them, the cry is raised that they are 'behind in intellectual culture,' their schools were never known to lack in moral force and power."[35] Although there was societal disapproval of "the backwardness of parochial schools," Catholics fought hard to keep their children in them. This was a conscious effort to maintain a Catholic culture and sense of community in the United States.

The economic nature of the riots stemmed from tensions between unskilled Irish laborers and skilled Protestant artisans. The severe economic depression of the late 1830s and 1840s meant that many Protestant men were out of work. Not only were these Protestant artisans out of work, but after the Industrial Revolution and by the time of the depression their entire economic system had become outdated. The wage-labor system almost entirely replaced the apprenticeship system by the time the depression caused wages to crash. "Through American history, especially in periods of economic depression," argues Kenny, "organized labor has been one of the principal sources of nativism."[36] Therefore, many of the instigators of the Philadelphia riots were Protestant artisans. Nativists exploited fraught labor divisions, so when Bishop Kenrick attempted to prevent public schools from requiring use of the King James Bible, tensions exploded into violence. The rioters burned Catholic homes, a Catholic seminary, two Catholic

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[34] Mary A. B. Maher, "Catholic Woman as an Educator," in *The World's Congress of Representative Women a Historical Résumé for Popular Circulation of the World's Congress of Representative Women, Convened in Chicago on May 15, and Adjourned on May 22, 1893, under the Auspices of the Woman's Branch of the World's Congress Auxiliary*, ed. May Wright Sewall (Chicago: Rand & McNally, 1894), 136.
[35] Ibid, 137
[36] Kenny, *The American Irish*, 81.

churches, and a school run by the Sisters of Charity between May 8 and May 10.[37] The Governor placed Philadelphia under martial law while Pennsylvania militiamen settled the riots until a second round of violence sparked in July. 5,000 Nativists paraded through the streets of Philadelphia on July 4, 1844, starting in front of Independence Hall, while 100,000 others "cheered from the sidewalk."[38]

The riots of 1844 galvanized Philadelphia's City Council to establish a professional police force and to consolidate the districts of Philadelphia into one county in 1854.[39] Two years later, the Irish dominated Democratic party successfully elected Quaker Richard Vaux, "friend of the Irish," mayor of Philadelphia.[40] Under Vaux, Irish and anti-nativists were appointed to positions of power on the police force and in prisons. After this victory nativist violence died down in the United States, although the ideology did not. In 1890 Uncle Sam Jr. complained "Through the influence of the Irish over the dough-faced politician it is almost impossible for a Protestant to obtain work on a city force."[41] Historian Noel Ignatiev argues that the appearance of the Irish cop "meant that thereafter the Irish would be officially empowered (armed) to defend themselves from the nativist mobs."[42] The color of this kind of nativism does not even begin to touch the surface of the kind of opinions Protestants held about the Catholics in their midst. In the next chapter, the role women played in anti-Catholic narratives will be explored. Indeed, the confusion and fear that surrounded the female Catholic drew some of the most intense outrage from Protestant America.

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[37] Kenny, *The American Irish*, 81; Fisher, *Communion of Immigrants*, 47; Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 150
[38] Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 151
[39] Ibid., 156-157.
[40] Ibid., 162
[41] Uncle Sam Jr., *Roman Catholic Irish in New England*, 10.
[42] Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 164.

Women, Faith, and Reform

After Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Hotel Dieu,* the supposedly true account of Maria Monk's escape from a convent, was the best-selling book of the 19th century. "sold over 300,00 copies, an enormous figure at a time when the nation's population was less than 20 million."[43] The popularity of the book, and the proliferation of other escaped nuns' tales like it exemplify the female-centered narratives of anti-Catholicism in America. Numerous "tell-alls" circulated between 1830 and the end of the century, and their very existence proved for Protestant Americans the unholy and horrific nature of Catholicism. This was a religion unfit for a proper nineteenth-century lady; many critics of Catholicism called it "anti-domestic." These and the many other manifestations of anti-Catholicism that were preoccupied with women made it nearly impossible for Catholic women religious to operate without having the legitimacy and sincerity of their actions questioned.

Women of the nineteenth century were confined by constricting gender expectations, but many found their way into social activist movements through the avenue of religion, and in doing so gained some measure of authority. However, while these women reformers pushed forward for their own independence, they were simultaneously subjugating those of other races, religions, and social classes by enforcing their own standards upon them. Those women who did not fit the mold of middle-class Protestantism found it difficult to exist within mainstream activist movements. The anti-Catholicism of the century dictated whose ideas were allowed and whose were not allowed in the zeitgeist of 19th century women's movements. Charitable work undertaken by Protestant women was inherently different from that done by Catholic women due

[43] Fisher, *Communion of Immigrants,* 46.

to the demographics of the women involved and the distinctive religious understandings of how to go about doing charity.

To understand women's activism during the 19th century it is first necessary to understand the cultural climate of the period. Good women of this century were expected to fit a specific set of characteristics, often referred to as "True Womanhood." The True Woman had four "cardinal virtues," piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.[44] Religion was expected to be at the very center of a True Woman's life. Women were more predisposed to religious life than men were, argued publications such as *The Ladies Repository*, and therefore it fell within their "proper sphere." A True Woman did not engage in activities that took her outside of the home, away from her husband, children, and household, but since church work promoted domestic duties it was deemed an acceptable expression of female authority outside of her household. The rigid separation of gender was a phenomenon distinctive of the 19th century, but can be seen as stemming from Protestant revival movements. Puritanical ideas about the difference between men and women were founded on the belief that the first Woman, Eve, brought about the downfall of Man, and was, therefore, the weaker of the two. But by the 19th century there was a spike in women's attendance at church and involvement in church activities that had to be explained. Suddenly church leaders started postulating that men and women had fundamental differences that made women more inclined to matters of religion and more open to conversion. This thread of dialogue lead directly into the ideology of separate spheres. Men, especially in the Northeast, worked increasingly outside of the home, so good Christian

[44] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966), doi:10.2307/2711179, 151.

households with good Christian mothers created stability inside the home, which was good for the family and good for the country at large.[45]

Julia Frances Hubbard illustrates many of the tropes of domesticity in her 1897 pamphlet "The Ideal Woman." The pamphlet enumerates all responsibilities and obligations of the 19th century female. She is "the embodiment of thrift, prudence, beauty, purity, wisdom, strength, and love."[46] She is, of course, Christian and an active member of her church. This woman fulfills the "demands at home, of Church, of neighborhood, of club, association, and of union" with grace, and as long as she follows all of these prescriptions there is room within the responsibilities of the Ideal Woman for work outside of the home. In fact, Mrs. Hubbard's descriptions reference a woman who "keeps in touch with the world" and "arranges to leave her family sometimes" as being a good and "blessed" mother.[47] As long as women continued to act accordingly, Mrs. Hubbard's book allowed women to participate in work outside the home. The authority of women even according to this exemplar of the ideologies of domesticity includes this sort of responsibility.

The same kind of special dispensation to work outside the home was not granted, however, to other women outside of middle-class Protestantism. Irish Catholic women, who often were required to work outside the home in order to provide for their families, were labeled "anti-domestic," as was their entire religious tradition. Whereas the center of Protestant worship and devotion was the mother leading her children and family in prayer at home, Catholic prayer and worship, according to Protestants, was focused on the external, the church and its patriarchal

[45] Ibid., 152.
[46] Julia Frances Hubbard, *The Ideal Woman*, (East Aurora, N.Y., 1911).
[47] Ibid.

priest.[48] Protestant women criticized Catholic mothers for abandoning their children for their jobs. They were also intensely skeptical of Catholic women who forewent becoming mothers altogether: the nuns. Nuns shunned the ideals of domesticity even more than their lay counterparts. Forsaking the bonds of marriage, refusing to bear children, and living in a community of other women made nuns gender deviants who threatened domesticity.

The ideology of domesticity was perpetuated through published writing. The economic and social climate of the mid-nineteenth century fostered a love of reading among American adults who used books, magazines, pamphlets, anything and everything published, as way of cultivating a collective social persona.[49] This was a period marked by rapid urbanization and industrialization. The United States was quickly changing, and the young nation was preoccupied with creating an identity, of coming to a cohesive understanding of themselves. Literacy rates boomed. By 1840 ninety percent of native-born Americans could read. Domesticity was the central topic of discourse in nearly every publication of the time because "women replaced men as the primary subject matter, largest reading audience, and the best-selling authors."[50] In this capacity as writers and consumers of the written word, women had the power to shape and define social values, allowing themselves to be included in the discourse of politics and national identity building through domestic writing. Historian Mary Ryan points to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as the most notable example of this phenomenon: a domestic novel that tackled the subject of slavery and contributed to abolitionist fervor among middle-class white women. The women who had the means and the capability to write and have

[48] Susan M. Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.
[49] Mary P. Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother: American Writing About Domesticity, 1830 to 1860* (New York, NY: Co-published by the Institute for Research in History and the Haworth Press, 1982), 14-16.
[50] Ibid.

their writing published defined domesticity, what it included and, more importantly what it did not include. They had both cultural dominance and access to popular publications that gave them a disproportionate influence on societal expectations and the ability to promote the values of True Womanhood while challenging the way it restricted their own actions. In the words of historian James J. Kenneally, "despite the restraints imposed on women by the idea of being a 'lady,' it was still possible for a bright ambitious female, without abandoning domesticity, to find an outlet for her intelligence… She could write."[51]

Mary Kelley expounds on the idea that women themselves were the biggest contributors to the field of domestic writing in *Private Women, Public Stage* in which she delves into the writing of some of the nineteenth century's most popular female writers and the genre that they created which Kelley calls "literary domesticity." Women authors pushed gender boundaries, but enforced them at the same time. Their writing featured women who broke out of stereotypical roles but also many who did not. Augusta Evans Wilson, for example, wrote the novel *Beulah* in 1859 about a woman who "after 'years' of thinking of one particular intelligent and educated man as her mentor, as her 'infallible guide,' she is 'troubled by a dawning consciousness of her own superiority.'"[52] This is clearly not a woman who fits with the subservience expected of a good domestic woman. However, Beulah is told incessantly that she should find no pleasure in books and ultimately she follows the path of a true woman, following her heart instead of her head. Although these women had to walk a tightrope between independence and True

[51] James J. Kenneally, *The History of American Catholic Women* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), 23.
[52] Mary Edith Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 103.

Womanhood, they were allowed the space to do this. As long as a woman operated within the frame of domesticity, her work was considered legitimate.

The vocabulary of domesticity created a dichotomy that separated respectable American households from the deviants. As Laura Wexler writes, "that what was 'leisure' in the nineteenth century was set up against that which was said to be 'labor'; what was interior was set up against that which was said to be 'external'; what was 'kindness' was set up against what was said to be 'cruelty'; what was 'civilized' was set up against that which was said to be 'savage'; and what was 'domestic' was established as the antithesis" of the daily life of many American women.[53] True Womanhood was neither feasible nor desirable for a large swath of women. Working class women, immigrant women, and women of color often could not afford the leisure afforded to the ideal True Woman to perform domestic duties. Many had to enter the "public sphere" in order to seek employment. Catholic women had their own values, which shaped their adherence to domesticity.

Amy Kaplan argues in her essay "Manifest Domesticity" that the power of the woman's social sphere could transform the conquered foreign lands of the frontier into a domestic space while erasing all evidence of violent conquest. The ability to domesticate foreign lands was instrumental in building the American empire. Discourse during this period of expansion utilized the language of empire for women's roles. References to "the empire of the home" are seen in *Godey's Lady's Book* and the writings of Horace Mann.[54] "The rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and that of domesticity," writes Kaplan "share a vocabulary that turns imperial conquest into

[53] Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 53-54.
[54]Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (September 1998), doi:10.2307/2902710, 28.

spiritual regeneration in order to efface internal conflict or external resistance in visions of geopolitical domination as global harmony."[55] Additionally, the role of domesticating woman was predicated on her ability to civilize and normalize foreignness, thus allowing the expansion of white culture into Mexican and Native American lands. The thread of domesticity weaved its way through almost all dialogue of the time period. Domesticity was the accepted rhetoric used to justify the unequal status of women in nineteenth century society. White, middle class women perpetuated this rhetoric because it also allowed for the subjugation of other races and social classes. A hierarchy of domesticity was created in order to allow these women to participate in imperialism.

This white Protestant ideal of women in 19th century American culture leaves very little room for movements and ideologies that do not conform. In addresses at conferences and in letters to their colleagues, Catholic women of these reform movements stand out. Because domesticity was based on the Protestant ideal of womanhood and propagated by Protestant women, it allowed Protestant women a legitimate avenue into reform movements while their Catholic counterparts had to work harder to legitimize themselves to work toward similar goals. Criticisms and denunciations of Catholicism by Protestants drove a wedge between like-minded activists who believed in the protection and welfare of the poor and vulnerable but clashed ideologically.

At the same time that domesticity narratives were constructing molds for good and virtuous Americans to fit into, other published works constructed enemies to pit the American native against. While literary domesticity comforted the collective American consciousness, licentious accounts of social deviance stoked the fires of American nationalism. Maria Monk's

[55] Ibid, 30.

Awful Disclosures of the Hotel-Dieu Nunnery was the most well-known or most successful of this type of literature.[56] Hundreds of anti-Catholic autobiographies and novels joined the discourse on family structure, gender roles, and morality, providing the antithesis: "these texts juxtaposed the sanctity of the Protestant domestic sphere, believed to be the bedrock of the nation's virtue and democracy, against that of the Catholic 'family,' deemed to be sexually deviant, tyrannical, and corrupt."[57] Just as women were the major consumers of domestic literature, so were they the consumers of anti-Catholic literature, targeted at them specifically to dissuade them from the seduction of Catholicism. Nuns became the foil of True Womanhood because by giving up motherhood, nuns were subverting norms. Nuns and priests were enemies of all 19th century Enlightenment and individualism. Cloistered from view and living a monastic lifestyle, they featured heavily in captivity narratives, in which a young girl would be lured into joining a convent and subsequently held there against her will.[58]

Indeed, the captivity narrative of a young woman named Rebecca Reed became another bestseller, and in 1835 sparked a nativist outcry that resulted in the burning of the convent where she was once a sister. The Ursuline convent on Mt. Benedict in Charlestown, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston "housed what was essentially a fashionable school for wealthy Protestant girls – in fact, only one-eighth of the students were Catholic."[59] One of the goals of the book, as explained in the introduction, was to "counteract the prevailing passion among Protestants in

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[56] Sandra Frink, "Women, the Family, and the Fate of the Nation in American Anti-Catholic Narratives, 1830-1860," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 2 (2009), 237-38, doi:10.1353/sex.0.0042.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Katie Oxx, *The Nativist Movement in America: Religious Conflict in the 19th Century* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 30.
[59] Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33.

favour of a convent education for their daughters."[60] In the book, written in the first person despite the fact that the narrative was actually compiled by a group of nativists, Reed describes the way she was lured into taking the veil.[61] It was Reed's idea initially to join the convent; she liked the idea of living her life in solitude, solemnity, and devotion to God. No comparable institution existed in Protestantism at the time. When she initially approached the Mother Superior with her intentions, the Mother Superior complimented Reed profusely, a detail Reed insists in a footnote that she included "in order to show the curse of flattery, &c. made use of by the Superior and those connected with the establishment, to draw the inexperienced into their power, and make them converts to the religion of the Pope."[62] Reed soon discovered that convent life was not at all how she was expecting it to be. An exceedingly common trope in the genre of escaped nun's tales was the nuns hiding the true nature of convent life from young Protestant girls until it was too late. The girls were drawn to Catholicism by the pomp, the splendor, and the mystery, but all these allures disappeared once they had committed their lives. Reed, for example, was forced to do menial chores, and perform humiliating punishments like licking the floor. "True accounts" like Reed's and novels that followed the same format insinuated that nuns were intrinsically deceitful, delegitimizing their work.

After Reed left the convent – she had been "expelled… for dishonesty" – she began spreading stories of the convent's misconduct, her abuse and escape.[63] She claimed she had been held in the convent against her will, a claim that benefited nativist propaganda. The allegation, as historian Susan M. Griffin explains, was that "if nuns are allowed to leave and tell their stories,

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[60] Rebecca Theresa Reed, *The Nun; or, Six Months' Residence in a Convent by Maria Theresa Reed late inmate of the Ursuline Convent, Mount Benedict, Charlestown, Massachusetts* (Halifax : Milner and Sowerby, 1861), iii.
[61] Fisher, *Communion of Immigrants*, 46.
[62] Reed, *Six Months' in a Convent*, 5.
[63] Fisher, *Communion of Immigrants*, 45.

Americans will abolish convents, and Rome's plot [to conqueror the United States] will fail."[64] Reed's tale stoked the fire of anti-Catholic nativism already burning in Boston and the surrounding area. Famous nineteenth-century Protestant preacher Lyman Beecher capitalized on these feelings, giving three anti-Catholic sermons on the tenth of August, 1834. The next night a drunken angry mob convened outside the convent gates, and by the end of the night the convent had burned to the ground.

Although this particularly violent anti-Catholicism died down by mid-century, negative attitudes did not dissipate, and amid this turbulent social setting, on May 15th, 1893, a Congress of the Representative Women of all Lands convened to "[present] to the people of the world the wonderful progress of women in all civilized lands in the great departments of intellectual activity."[65] The proceedings of this Congress of Representative Women "constitut[ed] a complete and comprehensive yet condensed and readable library on all the great themes in which the enlightened women of our time are concerned" wrote Clarence E. Young, the General Secretary of the World's Congresses. "No other book or collection of books on these important subjects can take the place of this history of woman's progress."[66] Among the topics of discussion were education, literature, science, politics, philosophy, law, and religion. Lily Alice Toomey of California addressed the Congress on behalf of the Catholic women of the world, and in the span of a few pages listed just some of the "thousand works of religion, philanthropy,

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[64] Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 32.
[65] May Wright Sewall, ed., *The World's Congress of Representative Women a Historical Résumé for Popular Circulation of the World's Congress of Representative Women, Convened in Chicago on May 15, and Adjourned on May 22, 1893, under the Auspices of the Woman's Branch of the World's Congress Auxiliary*, (Chicago: Rand & McNally, 1894), v.
[66] Ibid., vi.

education, moral reform, etc., carried on to-day by organizations of Catholic women."[67] Even before there was an organized State to do good works or to fund institutions, there were Catholic women working for the amelioration of the poor, the sick, and the orphaned.

Mary A. B. Maher, too, presented an address on "the Catholic woman as an Educator." She directed her speech to the critics of Catholic school education. "The church asks a fullness of education that the state alone does not give,"[68] she claimed, so it was necessary to provide Catholic children with an alternate education, presided over by women. She argued against societal disapproval of Catholic works and "the backwardness of parochial schools." "[A]lthough, in places where the odds are strong against them, the cry is raised that they are 'behind in intellectual culture,' their schools were never known to lack in moral force and power."[69] Both Toomey and Maher spent much of their speeches validating the importance of Catholic women to the progress of all women, with Toomey going so far as to remind her audience "until the sixteenth century all European civilization was Catholic; hence all the work of women in organization was the work of Catholic women."[70]

Catholic education and missionary movements struggled to achieve validity on this front because Protestant women often considered Catholic conversion nearly equivalent to the "savagery" they fought to tame domestically and abroad. In a publication called the *Heathen Woman's Friend*, published in Boston by the Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the

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[67] Lily Alice Toomey, "Organized Work of Catholic Women," in *The World's Congress of Representative Women*, 267.
[68] Maher, "Catholic Woman as an Educator," in *The World's Congress of Representative Women*, 136.
[69]Ibid., 137
[70] Toomey, "Organized Work of Catholic Women." in *The World's Congress of Representative Women*, ed. May Wright Sewall, 260.

Methodist Episcopal Church, women missionaries had the opportunity to share their successes and setbacks of a life spent converting "heathens." One of the major challenges the spread of Protestantism faced was the draw to Catholicism. Writing about "Female Education in India" one woman reported in 1869:

> It is said that within the last few years, at least 500 educated females of the Roman Catholic Church have gone to heathen lands to labor to convert heathen women from one dark system of error to another almost as dark. Are the women of the Roman Catholic Church to show more zeal, more energy, more self-sacrificing devotedness to the cause of Christ, than the true followers of the Lord Jesus?[71]

A true follower of the Lord Jesus was not Catholic, and thus a clear moral line was drawn between the Protestant "us" and the Catholic "them." As another piece from *Heathen Woman's Friend* warned, "In our work we have not only the heathen but the catholic [sic] element with which to contend."[72] In places like Mexico where there was a Catholic majority, the missionaries painted lone Protestant converts as heroes, observing the true faith in a land full of temptation.[73] By equating Catholics with non-white "heathens," the dominant culture of America forged a hierarchy of whiteness, placing Catholicism on a lower rung than Protestantism. This also lent credence to American imperialist claims across the world because delegitimizing Catholic conversion left Protestantism as the only justifiable option for the saving of souls.

It is no wonder that Mary S. Gove Nichols felt so defensive of the Catholic faith in a letter she wrote to Paulina Wright Davis in 1870. Davis was a prominent abolitionist, suffragist, and advocate for temperance, who founded the New England Woman Suffrage Association in 1868. In 1870 she published *A History of the National Woman's Rights Movement for Twenty*

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[71] "Female Education in India," *The Heathen Woman's Friend* May 1, 1869, 6.
[72] L.L. Coombs, "The Peking Hospital: Its First Patients," *The Heathen Woman's Friend*, June 1, 1876, 273.
[73] Sarah Aston Butler, "Among Mexican Homes," *The Heathen Woman's Friend*, 1879, 76-77.

Years and in the proceedings included Nichols' written refusal to attend Davis's convention because Nichols' Catholic beliefs put her at odds with Davis' conception of women's rights. "I have your letter reminding me that I was one of the first women in America who labored for the rights of woman, and inviting me to be present at your Convention" wrote Nichols. "I cannot come."[74] Nichols assured Davis that "my interest in the freedom of women has not in the least abated during thirty years of labor and prayer for her emancipation." But she could not support Davis if her right to practice her religion without "fear or hate" was not upheld.[75] An early advocate for women's health reform, Nichols was lecturing to women about anatomy, physiology, and hygiene as early as 1837, lectures that she published in 1842. In the 1850s, she espoused the merits of free love at a "School of Life" she founded with her husband. However, in 1857, she converted to Catholicism after the spirits of St. Francis and St. Ignatius appeared at her seances and remained a steadfastly devout Catholic for the rest of her life.[76]

Like Toomey, Nichols pointed to the time before the break between Protestants and Catholics as being a moment of great freedom for women: "when the Christian world was Catholic, women were not excluded from royal council chambers nor from deliberative assemblies."[77] The dominant Protestant nature of nineteenth century American culture forced both Toomey and Nichols to remind their fellow activists that before Protestantism there was

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[74] Mary S. Gove Nichols, "Letter from Mary S. Gove Nichols to Paulina Wright Davis, Sept., 1870," in *A History of the National Woman's Rights Movement, for Twenty Years with the Proceedings of the Decade Meeting Held at Apollo Hall, October 20, 1870, from 1850 to 1870: With an Appendix Containing the History of the Movement during the Winter of 1871, in the National Capitol*, ed. Paulina W. Davis and Victoria C. Woodhull, (New York: Journeymen Printers' Co-operative Association, 1871), 36.
[75] Ibid., 36.
[76] John Blake, "Nichols, Mary Sargeant Neal Gove (Aug. 10, 1810-May 30, 1884)," in *Notable American Women: 1607-1950*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
[77] Nichols, "Letter from Mary S. Gove Nichols to Paulina Wright Davis, Sept., 1870," in *A History of the National Woman's Rights Movement*, ed Paulina W. Davis and Victoria C. Woodhull, 36.

only Catholicism, and perhaps the advent of Protestantism did not result purely in progress for women. Nichols claimed that Protestants who had separated from the Church and who pointed to the Church as an institution that degraded women neglected to remember the "veneration for woman that has ever existed in the hearts of true Catholics."[78] Her argument was that far from stopping the progress of women, the Church actually promoted it. Indeed, Nichols went on to list a host of female saints venerated by the Church for a wide variety of accomplishments. She even cited St. Catherine of Siena, who "went like a prophetess to the Pope of her day, and feared not to rebuke him" because "she knew that the infallibility of the appointed Head of the Church, acting in the Divine Order and speaking as the inspired Vicar of Christ, gives him no immunity from weakness and sinfulness as a man."[79] Not only did Pope Urban heed Catherine's advice, but she was sainted for her wisdom. Some female saints were held in higher regard than males of similar character: "the name of St. Scholastica is more than the shadow of her glorious brother, St. Benedict; St. Clara was not the mere echo of St. Francis. St. Catherine of Siena, St. Bridget of Sweden, St. Theresa, St. Gertrude, were in effect Doctors of the Church."[80] Nichols named a handful of women venerated in the Catholic canon in order to make her point that "The Church never desired to silence women or diminish her usefulness when she has spoken wisely or done well."[81]

At the end of her letter to Davis, Nichols brings the work of Catholic into the present day, writing" Mother Margaret, the poor Irish servant girl, who refounded the Dominican order of nuns in England, founded five convents, built several churches, and established orphanages and

[78] Ibid., 36.
[79] Ibid., 36.
[80] Ibid., 36.
[81] Ibid., 36.

hospitals, has but just ended her remarkable career, and her life is now being read all over England, and I hope in America also."[82] By making mention of her, Nichols compares the work of her Irish Catholic contemporary with that of the leaders of the women's rights movement, who dismiss her religion as opposing the goals of that very movement. It is unclear why Davis included Nichols in the publication, especially when her letter is read in the context of the rest of the proceedings. Examining the resolutions presented for discussion illuminates the view of the majority of the women involved in the movement:

> *Resolved*, That it is as disastrous to human progress to teach women to bow down to the authority of man, as divinely inspired, as it is to teach man to bow down to the authority of Kings and Popes, as divinely ordained, for in both cases we violate the fundamental idea on which a Republican government and the Protestant religion are based — *the right of individual judgment.*
>
> *Whereas*, The accident of sex no more involves the capacity to govern a family than does the accident of Papal election or royal birth the capacity to govern a dominion or a kingdom.[83]

In outlining their goals for the rights of women in the United States, the committee of the convention was drawing a conception of American liberty steeped in anti-Catholicism. "Human progress" could only be made, according to these resolutions, in a society with a republican government and a Protestant religious tradition. They viewed the Pope in the same light as they viewed kings: both were repressive to the republican ideals of the nation. What was more, if the nation rejected the authority of kings and rejected the authority of the Pope, then necessarily it must reject the authority of men over women. Therefore, the very notion of women's rights for

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[82] Ibid., 36.

[83] "Resolutions" in *A History of the National Woman's Rights Movement, for Twenty Years with the Proceedings of the Decade Meeting Held at Apollo Hall, October 20, 1870, from 1850 to 1870: With an Appendix Containing the History of the Movement during the Winter of 1871, in the National Capitol*, ed. Paulina W. Davis and Victoria C. Woodhull, (New York: Journeymen Printers' Co-operative Association, 1871), 33.

this committee was predicated on a Protestant nation, and could not exist coincidentally with Catholicism.

However, it is a misconception that Catholicism and women's liberation could not coexist. In fact, it can be argued Catholic sisters "were among the most liberated women in nineteenth-century America."[84] Most of the communities in which sisters lived were outside of the authority and control of men. Women's religious communities could be one of two designations: diocesan approved or pontifical approved. Only those communities that were diocesan approved fell under the direct jurisdiction of the local bishop, but canon law sanctioned female superiors with authority in "admission to the congregation, education, and formation."[85] Pontifical approved communities answered only to the authorities in Rome. When conflicts between communities and bishops over authority broke out, many sisters fought staunchly for their independence. Some sought pontifical status. Others, like the Sisters of Mercy and their founder Mary Francis Ward, threatened to leave cities or withdraw from parochial schools if their demands were not met.[86]

Catholic women had to fight for a space in 19th century activist movements, defending not only their actions but also their faith as Catholics. The nature of American nativist culture at this moment in time was upheld by women who fit the mold of True Womanhood and could therefore work within its constraints. Social norms for white middle-class Protestant women allowed for some outward mobility, a legitimate opportunity for women to fulfill their female obligation outside of the home. According to many Protestants, Catholicism threatened the foundations of American normalcy. Nuns featured prominently in mainstream America's anxiety

[84] Kenneally, *The History of American Catholic Women*, 43.
[85] Ibid., 45.
[86] Ibid., 47.

about Catholicism. They were portrayed as mistrustful, deviant women who preyed on the naïveté of the young. However, this did very little to hinder these women who devoted their lives to good works.

Recreating Culture in Catholic Orphanages

Protestant ethics and ideologies permeated the mainstream culture of nineteenth-century America, seeping into secular institutions. Public schools, poorhouses, and orphanages run by the state were imbued with underlying Protestantism. If Catholicism were to thrive or even survive on American soil, something had to be done to shield and protect Catholic culture and tradition. The patriarchal hierarchy of the Catholic Church created some of its own institutions in the United States, which played a part in combatting imposed Protestantism, but at the center of the struggle to maintain and recreate Catholic cultural identity were women who operated mostly outside the patriarchal structure in their work as nuns. Crucial to the success of American Catholicism was the guardianship of its most vulnerable children, orphans whose faith and identity could either be lost in secular institutions or protected in Catholic ones. As the nineteenth century progressed the goals of the orphanages shifted. In the early part of the century the orphanages played a defensive role, actively combatting anti-Catholicism. After the Civil War, nuns in Catholic institutions provided their wards the opportunity to rise out of poverty and were critical in the creation of an Irish-Catholic middle-class.

The first Catholic orphanage in Philadelphia was opened in 1806 and staffed by women of America's very first order of women religious, the Sisters of Charity. Rapidly, the need for more space and more women to care for Philadelphia's orphans grew. In 1829, a home was opened just for orphaned girls, the Catholic Home for Destitute Children, and in 1836 one was opened just for boys. The home for boys, called St. John's Orphan Asylum, exemplifies the far-reaching influential nature of the sisters' daily work. A mere two years after it opened its doors, St. John's housed, clothed, and educated sixty orphan boys. Seven Sisters of Charity ran the day-

to-day operations of caring for the boys, who were between the ages of four and ten, as well as running a day school for forty more local boys and another for a hundred local girls.[87] Sundays, the sisters provided Catechism instruction not just for the children but also for "a class of twenty-five or thirty young women." These young women were also afforded the opportunity once a week to receive lessons in reading and writing. Educating the community's young women was another critical element in the betterment of Catholics in America as a whole. The educated daughters of the immigrant working class--of domestics, laundresses, and needleworkers--could be propelled into jobs in clerical fields, as public school teachers and telephone operators, jobs that launched them into the middle class.[88] Writing in 1838, St. John's Board of Managers recognized the long-lasting impact their institution would have.

> To a person of a reflecting mind, it is evident. . .that the amount of real and lasting good that is thus affected [sic] by this Institution is incalculable. The benefits, both temporal and spiritual, which the patrons of St. John's Asylum thus enable these devoted sisters to dispense, do not merely affect the large number of children and others who are the immediate objects of their most anxious attentions, but they extend to the community at large, and advance greatly the cause of morality and true religion.[89]

When the children of the community were educated in the religion and values of the culture, it benefited the whole community. Clearly, the Catholic proprietors of St. John's understood this, and they placed the religious concerns of children at the very heart of Catholicism's success in the United States.

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[87] Report of the Board of Managers of the St. John's Orphan Asylum, 1838, box IC0125, Institutions Collection, Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center, Wynnewood.
[88] Kane, *Separatism and Subculture*, 149.
[89] Report St. John's Orphan Asylum, 1838, Institutions Collection.

In Boston, St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum opened its doors on October 2, 1833, and was officially incorporated on March 23, 1843.[90] Three sisters of the Sisters of Charity, Sister Ann Alexis, Sister Blandina, and Sister Loyola, founded the orphan asylum as an off-shoot of a free day school for girls. Ten years after the asylum was incorporated, eight sisters ran the daily operations of looking after seventy four orphans. In addition, they continued the administration of the free school for "several hundred poor children, who are taught the principles of our Holy Religion, and the elementary branches of a common education."[91]

The majority of Catholic orphanages also accepted children who were not orphans. Children could be placed in the care of the home's sisters by parents or guardians who could not appropriately care for them. Sometimes this placement was temporary, and children would eventually return to living with their parents after their stint in the home. Sometimes it was not. Historian Maureen Fitzgerald refers to this as a "revolving door policy."[92] St. John's Orphan Asylum, according to its 1855 annual report, enacted this policy in 1853, and required "friends" of the children to pay "a small weekly stipend for their support."[93] The Church Home for Orphan and Destitute Children in Boston even set aside three hours once a month for friends and parents to visit.[94] According to the annual report for the year 1861, the majority of the children in Boston's St. Vincent's – 140 out of 216 – were supported by relatives or friends.[95]

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[90] First Annual Report of St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum, October 29, 1843, St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum Corporation Records 1842-1895, Boston Archdiocesan Archives, Braintree.
[91] Edwin A Palmer, Tenth Annual Report of St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum, October 20, 1853, St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum Corporation Records, 1842-1895, Boston Archdiocesan Archives, Braintree.
[92] Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion*
[93] Twenty- Second Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the St. John's Orphan Asylum, for the year ending May 31st, 1855, box IC0125, Institutions Collection, Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center, Wynnewood.
[94] Constitution of the Church Home for Orphan and Destitute Children, in Boston : with the by-laws of the Board of Managers, 1865, box 1865, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
[95] Eighteenth Annual Report of St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum, September 30, 1861, St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum Corporation Records 1842-1895, Boston Archdiocesan Archives, Braintree.

The creation of this kind of policy directly reflected Catholic theology. Catholicism focused on community, on the Church, and its continued stability, while Protestantism focused on the individual and the singular experience of conversion. Therefore, the goals of Catholic and Protestant charities were often vastly different. While Catholic children's charities attempted to maintain community and protect the bonds therein, Protestant charities attempted to protect and maintain the individual. Many women's societies of this period were founded with the express purpose of "saving" working-class children, whether orphaned or otherwise, by converting them to Protestantism. Little to no regard was given to their parents who were, more often than not, considered undeserving of charity, too far gone to be effectively converted. Working-class Irish Catholic families were deemed lazy, degenerate, and dangerous, which legitimized the taking away of their children. Catholic revolving door orphanages permitted working-class Irish-Catholic families to circumvent this outcome both by providing a space for their children to be cared for without sacrificing their religion, and by giving parents a chance to save enough money to bring their families out of poverty. Imperative to Catholic immigrants' success in the United States was this opportunity: parents could spend less money on raising their children entrusted to the safety and security of the sisters, and children could return home with a religious education and, perhaps more crucially, an education in an employable skill. The work of nuns allowed for the descendants of Catholic immigrants to more easily move up and out of the working class.

The Sisters of St. Joseph dedicated their entire mission in Philadelphia to this kind of redeeming care and education. When the first few women from the order arrived in Philadelphia in 1847 it was at the request of the bishop to help staff St. John's. Soon, the sisters had established their own Motherhouse in the Chestnut Hill area of Philadelphia and were running two Philadelphia orphanages: St. John's and the Catholic Home for Destitute Children, which

eventually came to be known as the Catholic Home for Orphan Girls. *The Story of Philadelphia's Catholic Home for Orphan Girls, 1863 - 1926* was published in 1926 by the Institution to rectify "the lack of full information concerning our own foundations" as well as to provide a platform to describe the conditions in which their orphans presently lived.[96] By 1926, nearly all of the turmoil faced by nineteenth-century American and Irish Catholics had settled, providing the nuns of the Order of the Sisters of St. Joseph who staffed the Home and wrote this booklet a bit of perspective on the circumstances surrounding its founding. Chartered in 1863 as The Catholic Home for Destitute Children, the Home was meant to "prevent the proselytizing of Catholic children and to provide for the orphans of Catholic soldiers killed in the Civil War."[97] At the time of the writing of this booklet, the Home boasted of spacious facilities at 29th Street and Hunting Park Avenue, a parochial school for their wards as well as other local children, and the wherewithal to take their charges on outings to the country and seaside.

This 1926 booklet can be set in a context of religious turmoil for Catholics in Philadelphia and America writ large. In understanding the experience of nineteenth century American Catholics, one can understand the author's motives for writing the way she did. By choosing to touch on the tragedy of the past that led to the need for a Home for Catholic girls, the author can highlight the good philanthropic works that had been done in the intervening years. Because the information in this booklet was more than likely being consumed by the benefactors or potential benefactors of the Home, the author was certain to emphasize the good work being done by the nuns for the girls. Writing a history of the Home that emphasized its strong commitment to the amelioration of the community, the Sisters of St. Joseph demonstrated that

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[96] *The Story of Philadelphia's Catholic Home for Orphan Girls, 1863-1926*, 1926, The Sisters of St. Joseph Archives, Chestnut Hill College, Chestnut Hill, 5.
[97] Ibid., 7.

their benefactors' money was being put to good use and confirmed the necessity of their institution's continued success.

April of 1861 brought new kind of violence to the people of Philadelphia and Boston and the rest of the nation. Thousands of Irish Catholic men, newly minted American citizens, enlisted or were drafted into the war effort, on both the Confederate and Union sides, many serving in Irish Catholic units.[98] Philadelphia's Catholic women played their part for the Union as well. The Daughters of Charity staffed Satterlee Military Hospital for wounded soldiers from 1862 to 1865. The Catholic Home for Destitute Children was opened "for the special care of little ones forced by the sad fortunes of civil warfare to accept the role of a 'Nation's wards'" under the Sisters of Charity (and later the Sisters of St. Joseph).[99] As the Sisters of St. Joseph write in their 1926 booklet, "that crisis [served] to try women's hearts with their unmeasured capacity for sympathy and burden bearing."[100] St. Vincent's of Boston, too, made the orphans of the war a priority: "the calamity of war has made the children of many a happy home orphans, and our Institution must throw open its doors to all such."[101] Some have argued that the Civil War was a turning point for Irish Catholic assimilation into American culture, as their military participation perhaps persuaded some nativists of their loyalty to the nation.[102] Still others have insist that widespread opposition to emancipation among even Northern Irish kept them distinct from the mainstream.[103]

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[98] Kenny, *The American Irish,* 124.
[99] *Catholic Home for Orphan Girls,* 7.
[100] Ibid., 7.
[101] Twentieth Annual Report of St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum, September 30, 1863, St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum Corporation Records 1842-1895, Boston Archdiocesan Archives, Braintree.
[102] Kenny, *The American Irish, 123*
[103] Kenny, *The American Irish,* 124; Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 164; O'Connor, *The Boston Irish,* 88.

The conditions of the original Home are described in the booklet as "troubled."[104] "[It] is easy to understand the early difficulties of insufficient room, defective drainage, etc.," write the 1926 Sisters, "which, as we learn from the painstaking reports presented even then by the Superior in charge, resulted in the ill health both of the children and the Sisters."[105] These poor conditions serve to garner the sympathy of the reader while simultaneously providing a comparison point for later, improved conditions of the home. Little time is wasted on the difficulties of the Home's earliest facilities. In fact, by May of 1865, just two years after being chartered, the Home opened its doors at 1720 Race Street, "which for many succeeding decades remained as a Mecca for charitable endeavor."[106] That building was then renovated in December of 1876 and by February of 1877, mass was celebrated for the first time in the Home's chapel. "On [that] great occasion six of the little ones made their First Holy Communion," writes the author "at what might be called, and was no doubt considered by them, their *own* altar."[107] The emphasis on "their *own*" is telling of how the nuns considered their Home: a personal safe haven for Philadelphia's young Catholic girls to guard and grow their faith. On the most basic level, the Home provided beds, clean clothing, food, and medical care. Writing in 1898, the sisters requested of that the board find the means to provide every child with her own bed. "Coming as they do from places unhealthy and often vicious," the sisters wrote of their children, "the putting of more than one in a bed, is most injurious, and undoes much of the good we might hope to do."[108] In 1899, the sisters requested of the Bishop funds to build a fire escape.[109] The

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[104] *Catholic Home for Orphan Girls*, 10.
[105] Ibid., 10.
[106] Ibid, 10.
[107] Ibid, 11.
[108] Report to the Board of Managers Catholic Home, April 1, 1898, The Sisters of St. Joseph Archives, Chestnut Hill College, Chestnut Hill.

preoccupation with these more material needs, as opposed to religious ones, points to a change in the primary role. No longer was there an urgency to provide spiritual aid, now what was most needed was physical aid. This perhaps can be attributed to a growing Irish-Catholic middle-class in the post-bellum period. With a growing number of American Irish-Catholics participating in politics, protection from anti-Catholicism was assured. Orphanages could instead begin to provide Catholic children with a safe environment to grow into a productive member of the American middle-class.

The Home was no longer just a place for girls to learn religious tenets and basic education, for "[b]eginning at the Kindergarten stage, the children share[d] the same system and class hours as the students of parochial schools, with carefully graded tasks in housework and domestic branches set for them when they attain[ed] the proper age."[110] Available to the girls are the Home, too, were "[c]ourses in Domestic Science at such centres as the Drexel Institute – commercial courses at the Catholic High School, far-famed for its successes in that particular line – musical instruction, instrumental and vocal – millinery and dressmaking lessons."[111] The girls were given an education in a skill, which allowed them to become hard-working and successful contributors to society. This kept America's young Catholic girls on the path out of a strictly working-class future.

This *Catholic Home* booklet makes certain to mention that the lives the girls lead were not all work and no play. Indeed "in the later years there were steamboat rides on the Schuylkill, visits to Lincoln Park, wonderful picnic days, now in the spacious grounds of Mount St. Joseph,

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[109] Report to the Board of Managers Catholic Home, October 1, 1899, The Sisters of St. Joseph Archives, Chestnut Hill College, Chestnut Hill.
[110] *Catholic Home for Orphan Girls*, 19.
[111] Ibid., 19.

again at the beautiful country home of a friend who wearied never of such well-doing and crowned her own record of the memorable June of 1894, when she announced that a seaside home for the summer months at Sea Isle City, N.J., was ready for the orphans' occupancy, being her gift as a memorial of loved ones who had 'gone before.'"[112] Together with their nun chaperones, the girls had the opportunity to travel by ferry and by train to the New Jersey seashore, where "[m]any of the little travelers that day had their earliest glimpse of the wondrous ocean that proved for them as it has for countless others in every clime and land, a fount of physical health and mental development."[113] The booklet's author emphasizes the benefits to the children's health provided by these outings to "God's big bath tub" – a sweet term coined by one of the little girls in the Sisters of St. Joseph's charge. The individuality and creativity of the girls was always encouraged. Time in the day, especially during vacation days, was allotted for creative and artistic pursuits like needlepoint, music, or drawing and painting. The girls never had to wear a uniform "even for working day or school wear."[114] This focus on individuality and leisure pursuits reflects more mainstream middle-class, perhaps even Protestant values. As mentioned previously, individualism became in the nineteenth century an extolled virtue of the upstanding American citizen. The Sisters of St. Joseph encouraging this kind of individualism can be seen as a shift in Irish-Catholic culture in America. Indeed, by the end of the century many aspects of the dominant, white Protestant society were being taken on by the Irish-Catholic.

[112] Ibib., 17
[113] Ibid., 17.
[114] Ibid., 13.

The vital role nuns played as caregivers to the community's orphaned and underprivileged children cannot be understated. In raising the next generation of Catholics in the culture and faith, nuns safeguarded and proliferated American Catholicism. If not for women religious many Catholic children would have most likely been converted to Protestantism in secular orphanages and public schools. Additionally, the sisters who staffed orphanages provided their charges with useful skills and the opportunity to secure a better job than their working class parents. Because of the contributions of nuns, the children of Irish-Catholic and other working class immigrants could rise out of poverty and join the ranks of the middle-class, ensuring the culture of their faith could continue to thrive.

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