

WAR ON MONUMENTS IS DRIVEN BY HATE

Bill Donohue

Those waging war on the monuments—public celebrations of prominent Americans—assume that history is replete with good guys and bad guys; the good guys are those who stood up to injustice and the bad guys are responsible for it. The assumption is baseless. More typically, the good guys have had their fair share of flaws, too.

Take the issue of slavery. It is easy to cheer the abolitionists today: after all, it takes no courage to champion their cause. Monuments in their honor, therefore, seem well deserved. But are they? What if we found out that most of them were bigots? What then? Should we scrub the public square free of all American heroes?

The unpleasant fact is that almost all of those who sought the abolition of slavery were bigots—they were virulently anti-Catholic. What they said and did to Catholics was shameful. So what now? Should we take a sledgehammer to their statues as well?

Most Americans think that the anti-Catholicism of the 19th century was the product of uneducated nativists. But the truth is that the biggest anti-Catholic bigots were also the most liberal, and most educated, segment of the population. It was they who set the cultural tone against Catholics.

In his masterful book, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, Notre Dame historian John T. McGreevy offers plenty of evidence to back up his charge that those who supported abolition typically saw Catholicism and slavery as one in the same: both were seen as despotic systems. Indeed, the first abolitionist martyr, Elijah Lovejoy, “spent much of 1835 warning of the

Catholic menace.”

Lovejoy, a Presbyterian minister, believed that “slavery was a papist product.” Fond of calling the Catholic Church the “Mother of Abominations,” his rhetoric was matched by legions of anti-slavery and anti-Catholic ministers.

For instance, New School Calvinists spoke about the Catholic Church as the “Whore of Babylon” and the pope as “the Antichrist.” Many said that Catholicism was not a religion at all: it was a usurpation of Christianity, the work of the “masterpiece of Satan” headed by the “man of perdition.” This is why ministers such as George Bourne claimed that the Episcopal Church was “the sole true Church of God.”

According to historian John d’Entremont, Moncure Conway was “the most thoroughgoing white male radical” of the pre-Civil War period. Known as “Monc” or “Monk,” the Unitarian minister hated Catholicism as much as he did slavery, holding a special animus for the Jesuits. He even called up his followers to “Be warned and armed!” No wonder University of North Carolina historian Peter Walker concluded that his hate-filled campaign came “close to calling for a jihad against Catholics.”

If there was one family of abolitionists which worked tirelessly to bash Catholics it was the Beechers. Headed by Lyman Beecher, he was joined by sons Edward and Henry Ward, and his daughter Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (it was not by happenstance that in the novel Uncle Tom steers Catholic Eva away from the shackles of Catholicism, delivering her to the Methodists).

Lyman proved to be the reliable patriarch, teaching his children and his followers about “the most powerful secret organization that ever existed,” namely, the Catholic Church. He made that accusation, and many others like it, in his 1835 book, *A Plea for the West*. He argued that this “evil” institution “holds now in darkness and bondage nearly half the

civilized world,” relegating Catholics to “debasement and slavery.”

What was Beecher afraid of? Fear that Rome will affect American elections, and fear that Protestants might fall under the Catholic spell. He, and many like him, were also terrified of being captured by Catholics. He was especially worried that Protestant children might succumb to the rich teachings and traditions offered to them as students.

To those who say that “the Catholics do not interfere with the religion of their protestant pupils,” Beecher answered, “They cannot help interfering with the religion of their pupils.” It’s in their blood.

He gives the nuns a backhanded compliment saying they are so effective in their work that they always outclass Protestant teachers. But the praise is qualified: he blames them for “underbidding us in the cheapness of education,” drawing unsuspecting Protestants into their ranks. Worse, “Catholic Europe is throwing swarm on swarm upon our shores.”

Edward Beecher proved that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Like his dad, he taught that “Romanism is the enemy of mankind.” His 1855 book, *The Papal Conspiracy Exposed*, maintains that the Catholic Church is a “stupendous fraud,” one that is “devised by Satan” to subjugate the faithful.

Led by the pope, who “claims supremacy over all earthly governments,” the Catholic Church developed many “peculiar doctrines,” among them being “transubstantiation, purgatory, saint and image worship, and the whole system of sacramental regeneration and sanctification.”

If there are two Catholic teachings that most upset these anti-slavery and anti-Catholic ministers it was the discipline of celibacy and the sacrament of reconciliation; both were seen as modes of social control. Celibacy, Beecher says, “cuts off the clergy from all ties of family or home, and leaves

them to the full power of the great centres at Rome." Similarly, "to fix the despotism on the people, the confessional is used."

There is another link between celibacy and the confessional: sex.

Referring to celibate priests as "these unhappy men," Beecher depicts them as "condemned through life to control impulses which God has implanted in their breasts," rendering a situation wherein they are "not allowed to retire from temptation and call off their minds from forbidden thoughts, but are deliberately, remorselessly, and constantly thrust into the very centre of the fiery furnaces."

How does Rome manage to pull this off? "This is done by requiring them to hear the confession of all their flock, in which, of course, are included those of females of all ages, and on all the points that are involved in a thorough confession." In doing so, the Church has outdone Satan. Beecher argues that "satanic ingenuity could not devise a system better adapted to corrupt and debase the clerical body as a mass."

He is nothing if not melodramatic. "The great law of the compulsory celibacy of the clergy," Beecher writes, "together with the established practice of appointing unmarried ecclesiastics to examine females in the confessional on all points on which the polluted mind can form a conception, is as perfect a system for debauching the clergy as Satan could devise."

It is because of these endless stories of licentiousness—made famous in *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* (a bestselling tale of lies about sex between priests and nuns published in 1836)—that noted historian Richard Hofstadter once described anti-Catholicism as "the pornography of the Puritans."

The Beechers reached a wide audience, making anti-Catholicism

respectable. The famous abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, echoed their work, speaking of the need to unseat the tyrannical pope. "The overthrow of the despotic power of the Pope...removes the most formidable barrier which has ever been erected against free thought, free speech, free inquiry, and popular institutions."

Frederick Douglass, a former slave and a leading abolitionist, was also known for his anti-Catholic diatribes. In his weekly publication, the *Douglass Papers*, he often spoke of "the prevalence and power of the Christian Church and religion at Rome and of the strange things that are believed and practiced there in the way of religious rites and ceremonies."

Douglass showed sympathy for the plight of the Irish at the hands of the English, but he nonetheless blamed the victim: it was the religious bigotry of Irish Catholics that was responsible for their plight. They may have had some things in common with blacks, he said, but in the end they were pawns of "Romanism," that nefarious force that brought "ignorance, cunning, and crimes" to Ireland.

Other liberals of the day who hated Catholics were the suffragettes. Jane Swisshelm played an integral role at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848; it was foundational to women's rights. But she was no fan of the Church. She saw Catholicism and slavery as one and the same, casting priest and slaveholder as equals.

A more well known suffragette, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, spoke out against "Popery," warning the nation that Catholics posed a threat to the advancement of individual rights. If they ever succeeded in their ambitions, she said, it would be the "death-knell of American liberties." Other suffragettes issued admonitions about the "idolatrous perversions of the Romanish faith," saying that wherever it prevailed, "progress and freedom" lose.

Leading the liberal brigade against Catholics were intellectuals such as Edgar Allan Poe, Melville, and Samuel F. B. Morse. Giving voice to the most scurrilous accusations against them were the *New York Times*, the *New York Observer*, Harper and Brother, *Harper's Weekly*, and the *Nation*. The *New York Times* said that Catholicism and slavery were "incompatible with the spirit of the age [and] liberty and civilization," both worthy of destruction.

According to one source, as recounted by professor Jenny Franchot, a partial count of anti-Catholic publications between 1800 and 1860 "shows some 25 newspapers, 13 magazines, 210 books, 40 fictional pieces, 41 histories, and scores of giftbooks, almanacs, and pamphlets dedicated to the anti-Catholic cause." Ivy League institutions such as Harvard and Yale were also home to anti-Catholics.

The idea that Catholicism was analogous to slavery even touched learned men such as John Adams. In 1821, he asked Jefferson whether "a free Government [can] possibly exist with a Roman Catholic Religion." The same sentiment was prevalent throughout Europe. Indeed, all of the 1848 revolutions were showcases of anti-Catholicism.

The real-life effects of this relentless intellectual assault on Catholicism were felt in the streets: churches and convents were burnt to the ground in many cities, provoking New York Bishop John "Dagger" Hughes to implore the faithful to take up arms in defense. Non-violent repercussions were felt in the schools and on the job.

If there was one famous American who opposed both slavery and anti-Catholicism, it was Lincoln. He said that if the nativists got their way, the Constitution would have to be changed to read, "All men are created equal, with the exception of blacks, foreigners and Catholics."

Those engaged in the monument wars have no interest in taking

down the statues of anti-Catholics. Neither should we. But for different reasons: they don't give a hoot about anti-Catholicism, and would, if anything, celebrate the antics of these bigots. We should oppose the removal of the monuments because it smacks of historical revisionism, and because it feeds the cause of uprooting our heritage.

Don't be fooled. The crusade to tear down the monuments has nothing to do with the truth. It is driven by politics. Those at the forefront of this movement are not guided by justice—they are driven by hate.