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# Competing Loyalties: Nationality, Church Governance, and the Development of an American Catholic Identity

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# Competing Loyalties

## Nationality, Church Governance, and the Development of an American Catholic Identity

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**ABSTRACT** The Catholic community in Charleston, South Carolina, found itself torn by competing identities and conflicting ideas about how to be Catholic in the new American democracy. During the late eighteenth century hundreds of refugees arrived in Charleston from France and Saint Domingue as a result of the French and Haitian Revolutions, and numerous immigrants from Ireland found their way to Charleston as well. A complicated struggle over who should be their priest, the one chosen by the local trustees or the one appointed by their bishop in Baltimore, developed and tore the worshipping community apart. Debates like the one that occurred in Charleston were common during the early republican era; and, traditionally, historians have viewed them as evidence that local congregations wanted to impose republican governmental structures on their church. What is often missing from these interpretations is an examination of the immigrant content of the individual congregations. Using ecclesiastical correspondence, published treatises, and personal papers, this article argues that finding acceptance among Charleston's residents was the primary goal of the city's Catholics, and this common goal allowed them to unite across cultural barriers and ultimately bring about change in the Catholic Church.

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Catholics were among the first settlers in British North America. In some colonies, such as Maryland, they were numerous, having migrated as large groups in search of religious freedom. In other colonies, particularly those in the South, Catholics were sparse and lacked organized congregations. During the colonial era southern Catholics' communal worship was limited to meetings in private homes for prayer and the occasional visit by a traveling priest.<sup>1</sup> This changed following the American Revolution as new state constitutions provided procedures for all churches, Protestant and Catholic, to achieve official incorporation from their state legislatures. In South Carolina this occurred with the ratification of the constitution of 1790, and the recently organized St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Charleston, South Carolina, quickly applied for incorporation.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of this important step toward inclusion, the Catholic Church, particularly in the South, continued to experience internal and external strife. Within the church, the membership included recent immigrants from a variety of European nations, and these groups frequently competed for the right to make church decisions. The immigrant status of the church as a whole also caused problems in the way the Catholic Church related to the larger community as the nonnative membership made the church look foreign and out of place in the Protestant South. Immigrant Catholics wanted to assimilate, and in order to do this, many attempted to minimize the foreign elements of their church. In addition to these issues, the Catholic Church also had a structure that some argued was un-American. Whereas Protestant churches usually employed the general principles of democracy when they made decisions, the Catholic Church received its direction from a rigid church hierarchy that restricted lay input concerning ecclesiastical decisions. The recurring theme for Catholics during the early republican era was the quest for acceptance as Americans; yet they were citizens of foreign nations, their speech set them apart from native-born residents, and

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1. Richard C. Madden, "Catholics in Colonial South Carolina," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 73, no. 1-2 (1962): 10-44.

2. "Constitutions of the United States of America, South Carolina: Constitution (1790)," *Constitutions of the World from the Late 18th Century to the Middle of the 19th Century*, [www.modern-constitutions.de/nbu.php?page\\_id=02a1b5a86ff139471c0b1c57f23ac196&viewmode=pages&show\\_doc=US-SC-1790-06-03-en&position=8](http://www.modern-constitutions.de/nbu.php?page_id=02a1b5a86ff139471c0b1c57f23ac196&viewmode=pages&show_doc=US-SC-1790-06-03-en&position=8) (accessed November 9, 2011). St. Mary's was incorporated on January 14, 1791; see Richard C. Madden, *Catholics in South Carolina: A Record* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985), 22. *Charleston [S.C.] City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, June 26, 1788.

they were members of a worldwide Catholic Church that took direction from a leader who, in many ways, resembled a monarch.<sup>3</sup>

These issues were constantly on the minds of Catholic Church leaders in America as they made pastoral assignments. Archbishop John Carroll realized that he needed to provide local leadership that would address internal conflicts between members of different nationalities and ensure that all members, regardless of their country of origin or their native language, had pastoral leadership. After caring for his congregants, a priest's other primary duty was to represent the church in the community. He held the power to improve attitudes about Catholics or augment previously existing suspicions. These dynamics clearly guided Archbishop Carroll's pastoral assignment of Joseph Picot de Clorivière to St. Mary's Catholic Church in Charleston in 1812.

This article examines this appointment and its effect on Charleston's Catholic population. Hopes were high for St. Mary's when Clorivière received his appointment. The archbishop intended that the Frenchman provide essential pastoral care to the large number of French-speaking residents of Charleston who had arrived from the French colony of Saint Domingue during the Haitian Revolution in the early 1790s. His presence along with that of an Irish priest named Simon Felix Gallagher would provide for the needs of the majority of the church's members, whether they spoke French or English. In addition, the archbishop hoped Clorivière's placement would improve Charlestonians' attitudes toward Catholics.<sup>4</sup> Since 1799 Gallagher had exhibited difficulties with alcohol.<sup>5</sup> The archbishop had worked with him for over ten years to reach a resolution to this problem, but it persisted. Carroll, ever mindful of the impressions Catholics were making in American society, worried about how Gallagher's actions negatively affected Charleston's Catholic population. The archbishop believed that Clorivière had a refinement Gallagher did not; though Gallagher would continue to be a factor in Charleston, Carroll hoped Clorivière would

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3. These attitudes continued to follow Catholics throughout the antebellum period. John England, who became bishop in Charleston in 1820, wrote that "one of the strongest topics against our Religion is that it is a foreign Religion, and it is not American, that it is the Religion of strangers, of aliens, etc." John England to Dr. Michael O'Connor, February 25, 1835, quoted in Peter Keenan Guilday, *The Life and Times of John England, First Bishop of Charleston (1786-1842)*, 2 vols. (New York: America Press, 1927), 1:481-82.

4. *Ibid.*, 164-65.

5. John Carroll to Simon Felix Gallagher, January 23, 1799, transcribed in Papers of Peter Guilday, Catholic University of America, University Archives.

contribute to a more favorable reputation for the Catholic Church in this wealthy port city where social graces were important.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, Clorivière failed to meet his superior's high expectations, and conflict erupted. This conflict, in spite of the damage it did to the Catholic presence in Charleston in the short term, played an essential role in the development of an American Catholic identity. Out of the resulting schism, the Catholic Church hierarchy recognized that Catholics in the American South needed to have a voice in ecclesiastical decisions; at the same time, maintaining the traditional hierarchical church structure was still essential. The church was able to accomplish both of these ends through the establishment in 1820 of a new diocese in Charleston, the first such bishopric in the United States outside Baltimore. Before we can understand how this was the best solution to the schism and how this shaped the formation of American Catholicism, we must first explore the events that led to this radical change in church organization.

For a short time after Clorivière's arrival in Charleston, the two priests at St. Mary's worked together in harmony, and sacramental records indicate that both men ministered to French- and English-speaking members.<sup>7</sup> Gallagher, in spite of his difficulties with the archbishop, held the affection of many of his parishioners. He was a gifted orator and served an important role in the community as a teacher.<sup>8</sup> Clorivière, for his part, expanded his catechism class with the addition of numerous French students and created an additional class for blacks.<sup>9</sup> His past counterrevolutionary activities haunted him, however. Before coming to America and joining the priesthood, he actively worked against France's revolutionary movement. He was involved in a plot to assassinate Napoleon and, with the failure of this conspiracy, fled to the United States in 1803.<sup>10</sup> His actions in France during the revolution and his later relationship with Charles X confirmed his sup-

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6. Richard C. Madden, "Joseph Pierre Picot de Limoëlan de Clorivière (1768–1826)" (Master's thesis, Catholic University of America, 1938), 55–56.

7. Madden, "Catholics in South Carolina," original manuscript, 21, Papers of Richard C. Madden, Catholic Diocese of Charleston Archive.

8. *Charleston City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, January 13, 1813; *Charleston Courier*, January 16, 1826; *Charleston City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, December 28, 1807.

9. Clorivière to Carroll, January 29, 1813, transcript among the Papers of John Gilmary Shea, Georgetown University, Rare Books and Special Collections.

10. Anna Wells Rutledge, "A French Priest, Painter and Architect in the United States: Joseph Pierre Picot de Limoëlan de Clorivière," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, March 1948, 165.

port of monarchical leadership, a position that most Americans in the early nineteenth century equated to rejection of republicanism.<sup>11</sup> Though historians have argued about how much Charlestonians knew about these events at the time, the controversy around Clorivière that erupted in 1814 indicates that many suspected him of royalist political leanings.<sup>12</sup> The previously amicable relationship between Clorivière and his congregants took a turn for the worse following a particularly controversial worship service he held.

When news of the defeat of Napoleon reached Charleston in June 1814, thirty members of St. Mary's approached Clorivière to request that he sing the *Te Deum*, the traditional hymn of thanksgiving, to mark the end of Napoleon's domination and the release of the pope. Since the French attack on Rome in 1796, Napoleon had been at odds with the Holy See. Pope Pius VI died while Napoleon held him in captivity, and the emperor similarly imprisoned the succeeding pope, Pius VII. The fall of Napoleon meant an end to these tensions, so a celebration of thanksgiving seemed appropriate. The Napoleonic defeat, however, also ushered in the restoration of France's monarchy.<sup>13</sup>

To celebrate the reestablishment of monarchical power would have been quite unpopular in the new American republic, and Clorivière rightly worried that Charleston's residents might misinterpret the *Te Deum* as such. Before proceeding with the service, he sought the advice of Archbishop Carroll. In spite of his efforts to secure approval, an announcement of the hymn appeared prematurely and compelled Clorivière to move ahead with the *Te Deum* in spite of his concerns.<sup>14</sup> The events that followed confirmed that Clorivière had been right to worry about how some in Charleston would regard this service.

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11. During his last pastoral appointment, Clorivière served as the priest at Georgetown Visitation Convent. While there he successfully petitioned Charles X of France for a painting that today hangs over the altar at the convent. Papers of Joseph Picot de Clorivière, Georgetown Visitation Convent Archives.

12. This plot to kill Napoleon is known as the Infernal Machine. Madden, "Joseph Pierre Picot de Limoëlan de Clorivière." Other sources include Pierre Le Bastart de Villeneuve, *Le vrai Limoëlan: De la machine infernale à la Visitation* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984), and Eleanore C. Sullivan, *Georgetown Visitation since 1799*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Visitation, 2004).

13. Edward Elton Young Hales, *The Emperor and the Pope: The Story of Napoleon and Pius VII* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968); Margaret M. O'Dwyer, *The Papacy in the Age of Napoleon and the Restoration: Pius VII, 1800–1823* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985).

14. Described in Clorivière to Carroll, June 27, 1814, quoted in Madden, "Catholics in South Carolina," original manuscript, 26–27.

As the priest made plans for the *Te Deum*, he received numerous threats on his life. For a simple service in a small church to elicit such a response indicates a profound depth of animosity toward his politics or, at the very least, a concerted effort to intimidate him so that he would cancel the service. The identities of those opposed to the *Te Deum* remain unknown; however, regardless of whether they were members of Clorivière's church or simply residents of the community at large, their actions heightened tensions throughout Charleston. Because of these threats, city officials accompanied by members of the local militia attended the service to curtail any violence that might erupt. This proved to be a wise precaution. As Clorivière stood at the altar chanting the ancient words of the *Te Deum*, a man moved toward the center of the church and advanced on the altar with plans to attack the priest. The authorities quickly apprehended the assailant, who was armed with a dagger; no harm came to the priest or his fellow worshippers.<sup>15</sup>

This event, however, drew a clear line through the congregation and highlighted the long-standing concerns many Catholics in the South had about how their neighbors viewed them. For some the service was merely an opportunity to offer thanksgiving for the safe return of their Holy Father, but for others hosting such an event jeopardized the reputation of the church and its members. To align themselves with actions that some viewed as anti-American and pro-monarchical represented a digression from previous efforts by Catholics to find acceptance in Charleston and in America. Clorivière's status as a French priest made his actions particularly dangerous for the French, as they feared their Protestant, English-speaking neighbors would suspect them of similar political ideology.

After reflecting on the events surrounding his singing of the *Te Deum*, Clorivière acknowledged that nationality often determined who supported him and who avoided him. He wrote to Archbishop Carroll, "I was . . . perfectly attended to by my friends and even strangers, but particularly by the Irish who were very zealous and ready to die in defense of their Church and their minister." His fellow countrymen, however, abandoned him because, as he stated, they were too terrified to attend.<sup>16</sup> Even the church sexton, a Frenchman named Mr. Duboc, refused to assist with the *Te Deum* and received a reprimand from the vestry.<sup>17</sup>

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15. Ibid. Mary Lucinda Morgan, "The Vestry Records of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, Charleston, South Carolina, 1806-1823" (Master's thesis, University of South Carolina, 1982), 52.

16. Madden, "Catholics in South Carolina," original manuscript, 26-27.

17. Morgan, "Vestry Records of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church," 52.

Exhausted from the turmoil that accompanied this event, Clorivière elected to quit his post with the blessings of his superior. He returned to France in late 1814 but quickly regretted this move. With Carroll's permission he made plans to resume his duties as pastor of St. Mary's; however, returning proved much more difficult than Clorivière and his archbishop had anticipated.<sup>18</sup> In Clorivière's absence, Father Gallagher had invited the Reverend Robert Browne from Augusta, Georgia, to Charleston to serve as priest while Gallagher traveled to the northern states. In his communications with the archbishop, Clorivière expressed his willingness to go wherever the church hierarchy desired; yet Carroll intended for Browne to return to Georgia and for Clorivière to assume his former duties in Charleston.<sup>19</sup> Carroll expected all the priests and St. Mary's members to follow his wishes without question.

Clorivière returned to Charleston in November 1815, but much had changed in his congregation over the course of his trip to France. The vestry during his absence came to agree with the Frenchmen in their congregation who argued that Clorivière's presence hampered the assimilation of Charleston's Catholics and contributed to negative attitudes in Charleston toward Catholics. In an effort to protect the gains they had made, the vestry moved to force the archbishop to allow them to choose their priest. The qualifications for this person were that he speak English as a native and that he hold to American political ideology. They argued that the archbishop, because he resided in Baltimore, did not understand the particular political and social dynamics of Charleston. In Baltimore Catholics were much more numerous and faced fewer prejudices from their neighbors, but in Charleston they stood out as different. Having a priest who sounded foreign and acted as if he adhered to un-American ideology was dangerous for the Catholic Church in the South.<sup>20</sup>

As far as the archbishop's office was concerned, the opinions of the lay

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18. Certificate for travel to France dated October 2, 1815, Papers of Joseph Picot de Clorivière.

19. Carroll to C. G. Cosslett, July 27, 1815, quoted in J. P. de Clorivière, *Further Documents Showing the Causes of the Distressed State of the Roman Catholic Church in the City of Charleston* (Charleston, S.C.: J. Hoff, 1818), 4. These claims appeared in Clorivière's account of the schism. He identified Cosslett as a witness to this, and he also stated that if Browne wanted to remain in Charleston, he would go elsewhere (4–6).

20. Clorivière, *Documents Relative to the Present Distressed State of the Roman Catholic Church in the City of Charleston, State of South Carolina* (Charleston, S.C.: J. Hoff, 1818).



leaders at St. Mary's mattered little. Clorivière was officially sanctioned to act as a Catholic priest in Charleston. For the next year the vestry refused to acknowledge Clorivière as their priest. Tensions between the church hierarchy and the vestry grew until finally the archbishop issued an interdict in 1816 that prevented worship inside the church building of St. Mary's. Clorivière received authorization to set up an alternative chapel, and a number of St. Mary's members followed him there.<sup>21</sup> Gallagher and Browne, throughout the controversy, sided with the vestry and continued to act as pastors of the interdicted church. A resolution of this dispute occurred only with the complete removal of Gallagher, Browne, and Clorivière and the arrival of two new pastors at Charleston in 1819. Through the negotiations of the new pastors, the vestry finally agreed to include language in the church bylaws that reaffirmed the powers of the appointed priest and the archbishop.<sup>22</sup> The primary goal of the vestry had been Clorivière's removal; through all the years of dispute, this was the essential point of contention between the archbishop and the vestry. The new agreement, along with plans to establish a new diocese in Charleston, served as a compromise. The vestry achieved its goal of having local control of priest selection through the installation of a bishop in Charleston, and the church hierarchy was able to avoid lay leaders' gaining control of priestly assignments.

Battles between the archbishop's office and local congregations over who had the right to determine pastoral leadership were not confined to Charleston but occurred in Catholic churches across the United States during the early republican era. The type of event that sparked the debate was different in Charleston, however. Immigrants were present in all Catholic churches; the particular circumstances in Charleston concerning the refugees from Saint Domingue set the experience at St. Mary's apart. Though refugees from Saint Domingue's slave insurrection found their way to nearly every port in the United States during the 1790s, Charleston was the largest English-speaking city with a significant slave population. Clorivière's celebration of the *Te Deum* came after years of efforts on the part of the French

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21. Clorivière, following the direction of his archbishop, published the interdict on December 17, 1816. Papers of Joseph Picot de Clorivière.

22. Detailed accounts of the many facets of the schism appear in Guilday, *John England*; Thomas F. Hopkins, "St. Mary's Church, Charleston, S.C.: The First Catholic Church in the Original Diocese of Charleston," *Year Book 1897, Charleston, South Carolina* (Charleston: Walker, Evans, and Cogswell, 1897), 427–87; and Patrick W. Carey, *People, Priests, and Prelates: Ecclesiastical Democracy and the Tensions of Trusteeship* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).

refugees to find acceptance in Charleston, and his actions threatened to nullify any accomplishments they had made.

To understand how and why this conflict had the power to exert such profound changes on the American Catholic Church, we must examine why each of the dominant national groups, the French and the Irish, rejected Clorivière and clamored for local control over the selection of their priest. Both groups sought acceptance, and though their particular circumstances were different, they united in their rejection of a priest they thought most dangerous to their efforts at assimilation.

When the *Te Deum* incident occurred, St. Mary's Saint Dominguan population was still coming to grips with making Charleston their permanent home. Most had planned to reclaim their plantations once peace returned through the French suppression of the island's slaves, but this proved impossible when the French army met defeat and Haiti declared its independence from France in 1804.<sup>23</sup> Political circumstances in France and Saint Domingue had followed the Saint Dominguans throughout their time in Charleston; Americans had carefully watched events in both places and transferred their attitudes about what they saw to the refugees.

Since the arrival of Saint Domingue's refugees in the early 1790s, many in Charleston had struggled with how to treat them and how to understand the slave insurrection that precipitated their fleeing. The refugee group included white planters, free people of color, and enslaved Africans. Initially, Charlestonians sympathized with the destitute white French planters, and a benevolent committee quickly formed to raise money to provide for their basic needs. This group collected over \$12,000 for their support, and the state of South Carolina and the federal government allocated additional resources.<sup>24</sup> This generous financial assistance as well as articles in the newspaper declaring the public's concern for the refugees made white Saint Dominguans feel acceptance and welcome.<sup>25</sup> All seeking asylum from Saint Domingue's slave insurrection did not have this experience; South Carolini-

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23. At the end of the Haitian Revolution, the new nation of Haiti, under the leadership of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, drafted its independence declaration and rejected its colonial past with France. The document attacked France for the evils of colonialism and rejected any future connections with France or its white population. Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 298–99.

24. *Charleston City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, July 9, 1793. DeSaussure Family Papers, 1716–1938, South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Society, Charleston.

25. *Charleston City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, July 9 and 13, 1793.

ans looked with suspicion on nonwhite refugees, as many feared their presence might spawn similar slave violence in Charleston or the surrounding countryside.<sup>26</sup> These fears quickly resulted in new legislation designed to prohibit the arrival of more people of color, both enslaved and free, from the Caribbean and to prevent the existing enslaved population from rebelling.<sup>27</sup>

Still, in spite of these precautions, white South Carolinians continued to worry. They needed to make sense of what they read in the newspapers and heard on the streets of Charleston about the violence in Saint Domingue. Reassuring themselves that such violence would not occur on their plantations became a major goal and directly influenced how they regarded their white Saint Dominguan neighbors. South Carolinians began to blame Saint Dominguan slave owners for causing the rebellion through excessively harsh treatment of slaves or through carelessly allowing their slaves to hear the French revolutionary rhetoric of liberty and natural rights.<sup>28</sup> As Charlestonians increasingly saw the white refugees as guilty of creating their own dismal circumstances, the refugees lost political and social clout. This resulted in a major shift in how they related to the larger community. By the second decade of the nineteenth century, when the controversy surrounding Clorivière emerged, they had long recognized that returning to their Caribbean homes was impossible. The benevolent committee had ceased assisting them, and refugees had to rely on their own industry to support their families.<sup>29</sup> Seeking the acceptance of their neighbors became more essential, as they needed Charlestonians to patronize their economic endeavors.<sup>30</sup> These

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26. *Columbian Herald*, June 4, 1794.

27. Resolution passed by citizens of Charleston, October 9, 1793. Other cities followed suit. Governor William Moultrie on October 16, 1793, ordered the deportation of all free people of color who had arrived in the last twelve months. For information about insurrections in Charleston that seemed to have connections to Saint Domingue, see Ashli White, "The Politics of 'French Negroes' in the United States," *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* 29, no. 1 (2003): 103–21, and Robert Alderson, "Charleston's Rumored Slave Revolt of 1793," in David P. Geggus, ed., *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 93–111.

28. Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution & Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

29. *Charleston City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, February 15, 1805.

30. Refugees used their past experiences to open businesses or sought employment in Charleston. Among their many endeavors, they taught fencing and French. One published a French-language newspaper as well as a city directory for Charleston, and another dealt in trade of goods and slaves. Numerous advertisements

concerns led them to avoid connections to unpopular ideology. Their French-speaking priest constituted such a danger, as he was their primary representative to the Charleston community.

The plight of Clorivière did not depend solely on what the French thought about his actions, however. The Irish at St. Mary's also played an important role in how this conflict evolved. They did not have the same fears as their French peers, so the singing of the *Te Deum* was not a problem for them initially. But many still eventually rejected Clorivière's leadership. Their concerns were not so much for his politics as for his language skills, and their response exemplified their efforts to find acceptance as Catholics in a predominantly Protestant city. The Irish, like the Saint Domingans, were recent immigrants whose Catholic religious background set them apart from their Protestant neighbors, but they shared a common language with native-born Americans. Having a priest who spoke broken English made the Catholic Church as a whole seem foreign. This, coupled with what many viewed as a nonrepublican church structure, led the Irish-dominated vestry to resist Clorivière's return and eventually to petition for the application of more democratic practices within the Catholic Church. Their efforts signified an awareness of the differences between Protestant church structure and their own Catholic hierarchal system.

Following Clorivière's return, the vestry, with the encouragement of Gallagher and Browne, began arguing for his removal. Edward Lynch, a member of St. Mary's, wrote to the archbishop's office declaring that the congregation contained mostly "natives of Ireland" and that they wanted an English-speaking priest. He asserted that the members "have insurmountable personal dislike to the Rev. Mr. Clorivière," and "none but a person capable of preaching clearly and distinctly in the English language will suit them."<sup>31</sup> The theme of language continued throughout the controversy. In 1818 the vestry appealed to the pope for Clorivière's removal and complained that foreign priests presented an enormous problem for American churches. The petition stated that in America "the minds of men are generally sway'd by reason, persuasion, and eloquence," and foreign priests, "if

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appeared; a few examples are *Charleston City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, October 8 and 17, 1793; *L'Oracle*, May 9, 1807; *Charleston Courier*, January 10, 1808, and December 11, 1812; *Charleston Times*, July 18, 1805.

31. Edward Lynch to Leonard Neale, October 7, 1816, quoted in Guilday, *John England*, 199.

they attempt to instruct their flock from their pulpits, would only excite contempt, or laughter.”<sup>32</sup>

For his part, Clorivière never really addressed these concerns. He recognized that the Catholic Church was a multilingual church, and he was able to communicate in both of its dominant languages. He was sent to minister to the French; and even though many of them rejected him, he continued to see himself as their pastor. As the conflict grew, he wrote to the archbishop that a separate congregation was necessary and would be “mostly in favor of the French, but where I am assured a good number of English hearers would assemble.”<sup>33</sup> This letter encouraged the issuance of the interdict that eventually forbade worship at St. Mary’s. Once the archbishop communicated the interdict to Charleston’s Catholics, the congregation split. Some of the Irish went with Clorivière, but a pronounced number of French-speaking Saint Domingans refused to follow him.

Detailed membership records do not exist for this early period of Catholic history, but, fortunately, the minutes of the vestry at St. Mary’s are relatively complete. They not only provide an account of who held leadership positions before the schism but include valuable information about who guided the interdicted church after 1817.<sup>34</sup> At the election of the vestry in 1806, the pewholders elected nine vestrymen: five Irishmen, two men recently admitted as citizens, and two others of unknown national origin. The next year the vestry became more diverse: four Irishmen, one Frenchman, one Saint Domingan, and three others whose national origins are unknown. This representation remained fairly constant until the schism surrounding Clorivière erupted. The Irish continued to dominate the board, but other groups were also present.<sup>35</sup>

The vestry minutes are silent on how the elections occurred. It is possible, however, that the nationalities present on the vestry mirror those in the larger congregation. When St. Mary’s was first organized in 1788, a notice appeared in the local newspaper stating that the congregation had elected

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32. Petition of the Vestrymen of the Roman Catholic Congregation of the City of Charleston, in the State of South Carolina, in North America, May 13, 1818, quoted in Morgan, “Vestry Records of St. Mary’s Roman Catholic Church,” 108, and Guilday, *John England*, 241.

33. Clorivière to Neale, February 13, 1816, quoted in Guilday, *John England*, 174. Carroll died as the controversy escalated; Neale was his successor.

34. No records exist for 1808 and 1809, but this was an era that was without grave conflict at St. Mary’s.

35. Morgan, “Vestry Records of St. Mary’s Roman Catholic Church,” 19–24.

two church wardens, “Mr. Hubert, for the Dutch nation; Mr. Chupin, for the French nation.” The announcement continued by stating that the congregation would elect two more “for the Irish nation” and that “all gentlemen of that nation are requested to attend.”<sup>36</sup>

Throughout the first ten years of the vestry records (1806–16), aside from the Irish, the board contained one trustee for each nationality. This changed dramatically when the church split and Clorivière received permission from the archbishop to set up a separate worshipping community in 1817. Two Irishmen and one Saint Dominguan resigned in protest and followed Clorivière. Another vestryman, a Frenchman, did not resign but no longer attended meetings at St. Mary’s. Those remaining at St. Mary’s Church elected a group referred to as the Committee of Seventeen, who appealed the interdict to the archbishop. This assembly included six Irishmen, one Frenchman, four Saint Dominguan, one Scotsman, one Spaniard, one Italian, and three of unknown nationality. Three of the four Saint Dominguan had never held a church leadership position before this event. Following their duties as members of the Committee of Seventeen, these Saint Dominguan remained active in church affairs until after the dispute had been resolved.<sup>37</sup>

Though determining the motivation behind each of the actors in this conflict is impossible, their nationalities provide a window through which to examine their behavior. In the early years after Saint Domingue’s refugees arrived in Charleston, survival consumed their every effort. Most had fled under conditions of duress and had been unable to prepare for their voyage or their future in America.<sup>38</sup> When Clorivière arrived at St. Mary’s in 1812, he reported to Archbishop Carroll that “the number of my countrymen is immense. More than in any city in the United States say they, I have been told that they are five thousand.” Yet they were not in church because they were too poor to rent pews, which was the customary way of achieving membership.<sup>39</sup> Clorivière’s work with this population before the *Te Deum* incident was by all accounts effective; therefore, a rise in the number of Saint Dominguan in leadership positions would not have been surprising. This did not occur, however, until after Clorivière left to form a new congregation. Until 1814 French members had been content to allow

36. *Charleston City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, August 8, 1788.

37. Morgan, “Vestry Records of St. Mary’s Roman Catholic Church,” 20–198.

38. Jeremy D. Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 289–326.

39. Madden, “Catholics in South Carolina,” original manuscript, 20.

the Irish to dominate the church's business affairs; but the *Te Deum* incident demonstrated that the Irish could not be trusted to employ the best judgment with regard to their French priest. The explanation for this lies in the original concerns that many Frenchmen had about singing the *Te Deum* that started this controversy. As the congregation became more and more polarized, some Saint Domingans embraced the opportunity to secure a more solid place in Charleston and within the Catholic community. By distancing themselves from Clorivière, they appeared to be embracing the American principles of republicanism. Not only were they rejecting Clorivière's royalist leanings, they were siding with those who sought to select their priest through democratic means. The French and Irish rejected Clorivière for different reasons, but they were able to unite around the idea that being American meant embracing republicanism—even in their church polity.

The Irish lay leaders who launched the attack against Clorivière welcomed their new allies in the Saint Domingans. Having French speakers on their side reduced the claims that the vestry was solely anti-French and reemphasized their particular complaints about Clorivière. As they made their appeals to Rome, the support of Frenchmen helped them broaden their appeal. This was not just about the dislike of a particular priest; it was about possessing the right to select the pastor they believed to be most qualified for their congregation, a worshiping community that existed in a particular time and place that was different from any other Catholic church in the world. They believed that only those living in Charleston had the qualification to determine who would be the best for them.

This conflict at St. Mary's has received much attention from historians of Catholicism. Their analyses typically argue that these difficulties resulted from American Catholics trying to impose a republican structure on their church. While this account certainly has merit, it represents only one dimension of the conflict. By examining the dominant immigrant groups and their pathways toward assimilation, we can see the complicated web of allegiances that members of St. Mary's held. Ultimately, this is the story of individuals seeking acceptance in a community that had become their permanent home. What their neighbors thought about them mattered socially, politically, and economically, and they felt compelled to protect the gains they had made.

Following the schism at St. Mary's, the archbishop reassigned Clorivière to Maryland, where he assumed new duties as priest at Georgetown Visitation Convent. One of his first sermons at Georgetown concerned the text

in which Jesus calmed the sea in the midst of a dangerous storm.<sup>40</sup> In the story the waves grew more and more violent, but Jesus slept. His disciples, alarmed that they were about to sink, called on Jesus to help them. According to scripture, he rose and immediately calmed the waters. Clorivière, reflecting on this in his sermon, compared the wave-tossed ship to the church. Dangerous waves had battered the church and nearly destroyed it. He argued that faith in God had delivered both the disciples and the church from perilous situations.<sup>41</sup> St. Mary's, like the disciples' boat, had survived the storm but not without changes. For the disciples the experience had helped them understand Jesus better. For St. Mary's the conflict had changed the way the church hierarchy understood the needs of its local congregations. As the Catholic Church experienced a huge influx of immigrants around the middle of the nineteenth century, these lessons would prove to be invaluable.

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40. Matthew 8:23–27.

41. Sermon for Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, 1819, Papers of Joseph Picot de Clorivière.



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