

1979

American and Catholic: The premature synthesis of the San Francisco Irish

Robert M. Senkewicz

Santa Clara University, rsenkewicz@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/history>

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Senkewicz, R. (1979). American and Catholic: The premature synthesis of the San Francisco Irish. In Alvarez, D. (Ed.), *An American Church* (pp. 141-151). St Mary's College of California.

Reprinted with permission of the editor.

This essay was originally prepared of the Americanization of the Catholic Church conference held at St. Mary's College of California in the summer of 1978.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rscroggin@scu.edu.

AMERICAN AND CATHOLIC: THE PREMATURE SYNTHESIS OF THE SAN FRANCISCO IRISH

Robert M. Senkewicz, S.J.

The tension between the terms “American” and “Catholic” is at least as old as the 1840s, when large numbers of Catholic immigrants arrived in the United States. The attempts of American Catholics through the succeeding 130 years to resolve that tension has spawned, in our day an increasingly sophisticated body of American Catholic history. But since the tension has been so pervasive, engaging theological, philosophical, political, and social issues, there seems to be little danger that we shall ever fully comprehend it (and thus put the historians concerned with it out of business!)

One of the most important complicating factors is the fact that “Catholic” has never been a univocal term in American history. Although the public image of the American Catholic Church has been, until recently, that of a monolithic fortress, ruled by larger-than-life bishops and cardinals, historians are discovering that there has always been a constant series of struggles and rivalries behind the seemingly placid walls. The present essay is an attempt to investigate one type of those struggles, the unequal contest between two of the ethnic groups which make up American Catholicism. Its thesis is that the stimulation of ethnic hostility was an integral part of the effort of one American Catholic group to resolve the tension between the terms “American” and “Catholic.”

The evidence for the essay comes from one city during one particular period of time: San Francisco during the Progressive Era. Neither the city nor the time was randomly chosen. San Francisco was selected because it was, from the eastern perspective which tends to dominate American historical writing, on the edge, remote, removed from the constant swirl of politics, ecclesiastical and national. But on a more mundane level, San Francisco was a typical American city. It had its rich, such as the railroad barons, as great a percentage of immigrants in its population as Chicago or Philadelphia, its political bosses like Chris Buckley or Abe Ruef, its scandals and its violence. By 1890 it was the eighth largest city in the country. Despite the claims of its more fervent boosters, past and present, it must be admitted that, besides its location, there was little to distinguish San Francisco from most other American cities at the turn of the century. Doubtless the evidence in this essay suffers from an excessively local focus; on the other hand, the American experience has been the sum of seemingly disparate local occurrences. A city removed yet representative: by looking at it, perhaps we can see through the national mirror a bit less darkly.

The Progressive Era was chosen for two reasons. First, the period is currently basking in the rare sunshine of historiographical consensus. For there is widespread agreement among American historians about the character of

urban progressivism. The period used to be regarded as a time of light and darkness, an era when decent Americans waged a successful battle against corrupt and venal political bosses whose major occupation was stealing from the public treasury. Currently, most historians approach the period in less dramatic fashion. They argue that the end of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of the professional classes. The political struggles of the time are interpreted as the attempts of the professionals to impose a corporate vision of scientific and businesslike efficiency upon the sprawling processes of urban government. A series of recent studies has confirmed that this basic interpretation, which was developed out of data from eastern and midwestern cities, is also applicable to San Francisco. Thus, when one writes on the Progressive Era, one is confident that the basic outlines of the period have already been sketched out.

The second reason for choosing the Progressive Era stems from the first. American Catholics tended to congregate in the cities, and a good number of the urban political machines at the end of the nineteenth century were based in Catholic neighborhoods. As the unwilling objects of Progressive reform, Catholics were deeply involved in the major political struggle of the age. Thus, when writing about urban Catholicism during the Progressive era, the historian knows he is touching a point at which American Catholicism and national politics intersected intensely. During this period, as perhaps during no other period, American Catholic history is a large part of the history of the entire American people.

The present essay focuses upon the major ethnic group in nineteenth century American Catholicism, the Irish. It argues that by the end of the nineteenth century the Irish Catholics of San Francisco had constructed for themselves a fairly elaborate set of perceptions, through which they laid claim to a privileged place in American society. These perceptions demanded the presence of potentially subversive alien Catholics, and the Irish were happy to assign that role to the Italians. Intra-religious ethnic rivalry was, the Irish fondly hoped, their ticket into American society: had the Italians not come, the Irish would have had to invent them. But events at the end of the Progressive era conspired to unravel the synthesis between Catholic and American which the Irish had so laboriously constructed. The synthesis proved to be premature.

IN HIS LAST REPORT TO ROME, Archbishop Patrick William Riordan of San Francisco, who was himself Irish, stated that sixty-four of his eighty-eight priests had been born in Ireland. Of the remaining twenty-four, the Prelate continued, only four had been born in the United States. These simple figures point up one of the most important elements of San Francisco Catholicism during the Progressive Era: its official tone, style, and concerns were overwhelmingly Irish. During this period, matters of interest to the Irish population of the city dominated the pages of the official archdiocesan weekly, the *Monitor*. A headline in one of the 1888 issues supplies a flavor of the reporting: "GLORIOUS NEWS!!! MEANING OF PAPAL RESCRIPT—IRISH NATIONAL LEAGUE NOT CONDEMNED." A regular column entitled "Some Irish News" or "The Irish Mail" continually reviewed Irish political and ecclesiastical affairs. World events were seen through the same prism. On April 13, 1918, when a large frontpage headline announced that the British were planning to extend conscription to Ireland, a long article bitterly denounced the

move. After the war, readers feasted on these types of headlines: "TERRIBLE BRITISH ATROCITIES IN IRELAND . . . BRITISH HUNS DEVASTATE IRISH TOWN . . . ENGLISH BABY KILLERS."

The *Monitor's* Irish eyes smiled or frowned on American events as well. In 1909, for example, it reported that a teacher in one of the San Francisco public schools, "a Miss Coon, or Kuhn, or Cohen," had allegedly attempted to establish for her classes "a fancied resemblance between the simian and human beings of similar strains. Under the latter head were grouped the Chinese and the Japanese, and with them was lumped the Irish in the general classification." The paper demanded that the teacher be fired for this "execrable comparison." All facets of San Francisco life were screened for slurs against the Irish. In 1911 the *Monitor* observed, "Our Irish readers will be interested in hearing that their race is again being subjected to vile ridicule in one of the theaters of San Francisco." A current play, "Dooley and the Diamond," was apparently featuring a drunken Irish policeman.

Irish virtues were not simply bound to the present. One editorial, entitled "Our Irish Mothers," declared, "They have peopled the world with pure and valorous men and have passed to the daughters of the earth the everlasting lessons of lofty motherhood." Naturally a race that did so much for the world at large also contributed heavily to the United States. The paper claimed that, since there had been a good number of Irishmen in the revolutionary army, "America owes her freedom from British tyranny to the Irishman." Even if the rest of the country did not appreciate this, the Commander-in-Chief certainly did: "Washington honored and trusted his Irish friends above all others . . . After the treason of Benedict Arnold, Washington ordered that none but Irish be placed on guard at West Point."

It is important to note that this Irish emphasis did not spring from the eccentricities of the paper's successive editors. In the mid-1890s, Riordan had written a friend, "As the majority of the Catholics who support our Catholic papers are of Irish birth and Irish origin, it is necessary that the editor should be in sympathy with the national aspirations of the race." The *Monitor* during the period under discussion certainly filled the bill.

The issues on which the paper chose to comment were consistently Irish-oriented. Since the San Francisco Irish had long been quite visible in labor organizations, the *Monitor* never tired of citing Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* and upholding labor's right to improve its working conditions. San Francisco workers were reminded that the Church was the "friend and defender of the laboring man and labor." The paper found it easy to support strikes, especially if the strikes were comfortably removed from the City. The 1912 Lawrence Mill strike and the postwar steel strike received favorable notice, and in 1919 the *Monitor* urged amnesty for jailed Socialist leader Eugene Debs.

In San Francisco, oriental exclusion was the other side of the Irish labor coin, and the *Monitor* was nothing if not consistent. In 1906, it serenely observed, "The more clearly the local prejudice against the Japanese is studied, the more apparent becomes its reasonableness to the mind of the dispassionate observer." The *Monitor* frequently denounced "the little brown men" for any and every reason. It once warned that the occupation of laundering, which engaged many Orientals, "was being degraded from a respectable American to a dangerous and hostile pagan vocation." At another time, it even argued that the Japanese reputation for good cuisine was undeserved! Less elegantly, it argued, "The Jap is an undesirable and unassimilable immigrant in a white

man's country. If the United States is to remain under the latter classification, barriers must be put up against the inexhaustible hordes of Japanese coolies."

But immigration restriction was a respecter of persons, or at least color, and the *Monitor* upheld the necessity of "the right sort of immigration," by which it meant northern Europeans. President David Starr Jordan of Stanford was denounced for correlating the political corruption in San Francisco and the large numbers of European immigrants in the city. The paper was willing to bar Socialists and Anarchists from the United States, but its general position on European immigration was aptly summed up in a 1907 headline: "NATION'S DEBT TO ALIENS. WITHOUT THE NEW BLOOD OF THE STURDY IMMIGRANT, PROGRESS WOULD BE BACKWARD."

This concern with desirable immigration was related to a second major theme of official San Francisco Catholicism. That was the vigorous assertion that San Francisco's Catholics were totally American. "We are Americans," proclaimed the *Monitor*, "and the day will come when the world will look upon us as 'the Americans;' because, safeguarded by our faith, we will have become the real custodians of all our country's glorious ideals." The logic was engagingly direct. If America was the best country on earth, which it was, and if Catholicism was the best religion, which, being the one true Church, it certainly was, then the best American was the Catholic American. No occasion was too remote to make the point. Commenting on a celebration in honor of Samuel Champlain, the *Monitor* puffed, "Yes, America was 'born Catholic,' and if we are but yet true to our best traditions . . . she will yet return to the faith." Apostolic Delegate Satolli's famous statement was repeated for San Franciscans: "Go forth bearing in one hand the Gospel of Christ and in the other the Constitution of the United States."

In common with Catholics of other cities, San Francisco Catholics argued that the system of parochial schools which they had built posed no threat whatsoever to American society. Catholic schools were in fact a bulwark of the social order. As the *Monitor* put it, "We must have Christian education to insure the safety of our nation . . . It is up to us to produce upright citizens through the medium of our schools." San Francisco Catholics argued that they had no quarrel with common education as such, but only with certain aspects of American public education. It was alternately godless and Protestant, which came down to the same thing. As Fr. Ralph Hunt, the archdiocesan superintendent of schools put it:

When however, she [the Church] saw that religion must be banished from the public schools, she unhesitatingly faced the alternative of building schools of her own . . . Sooner than take the risk of a godless education, she sets about providing schools at an enormous expense for her children.

Since over half of the Catholic children in San Francisco did not attend Catholic schools, the Catholic leadership spent a great deal of energy protecting those children from the crypto-Protestantism which, in its judgment, infected the public schools. The *Monitor* opposed the practice, for example, of holding the public school commencement exercises in Protestant churches. It also strongly opposed the introduction of the King James Bible, a "sectarian book," in any way, shape, or form into the public schools. As one correspondent put the matter, "If the Catholic version romanizes, then the Protestant version protestantizes." Catholics argued that the public schools

ought to teach only the religion of civics: "Religion is divorced from the state insofar as each individual retains his religious liberty, so long as his views do not conflict with the general principles of morality, patriotism, and the social order." These general principles, not being explicitly Christian, were admittedly second-rate, but at least they were better than nothing.

Catholics also insisted that the type of morality taught in their schools was not at variance with American citizenship. The Catholic Educational Association, which met in San Francisco in 1918, endorsed "the principles of natural rights which America has espoused in undertaking the war." The Association passed a formal resolution advocating "a vigorous and holy spirit of American patriotism."

The *Monitor* did not rest with its insistence that there was no conflict between being a good Catholic and a good American. It went on to argue that the atomistic tendencies of American society demanded the conservative influence of the Church. Otherwise the center would not hold. Orestes Brownson was at hand, and he was used:

Dr. Brownson was not incorrect in looking up to the Catholic Church as the great conservative influence that alone could rescue American society from its hereditary tendencies and safeguard the American social and political system. Already the leaders of the sects are beginning to recognize their powerlessness to grapple with the social evils that are running riot among their congregations. They are looking to the Catholic Church for a solution to the temperance question. They are invoking the example and influence of the Catholic Church on the divorce evil. They are slowly beginning to wheel into line with the Catholic Church on the question of religious education.

As the *Monitor* put the matter in a nutshell: "The principles of the Catholic Church coincided and strengthened the principles of Americanism." The high and mighty agreed: "Mark Twain is credited with saying to William McKinley, 'Believe me, Mr. President, the day will come, not in our time perhaps, but it will come, when the red flag of Anarchy and Socialism will raise its head in America, and then it will be found that the great bulwark against these evils will be the old Catholic Church.'" Quite literally, therefore, an enemy of the Catholic Church was an enemy of the United States: "Benedict Arnold was the only one of Washington's officers to suspect . . . the Catholics."

AMERICA NEEDED THE CHURCH. Where there was disintegration, the Church stood for order. Where, for instance, there was conflict between labor and capital, the Church stood for industrial stability. In San Francisco, Riordan set the tone. In a letter to his brother less than a year after the great 1906 earthquake, he wrote:

Buildings are going up on all sides, and the working men are getting the very highest wages. If we can only keep free from strikes during the spring and summer a great many of the business houses will be ready in the fall for business on the old sites, and the city will resume again something of a normal appearance.

"If we can only keep free from strikes . . ." How revealing. For official San Francisco Catholicism, willing to support strikes thousands of miles away, was very reluctant to see work stoppages close to home. For instance, during a 1907 Carmen's strike, the *Monitor* favored martial law to break the strike, and denounced labor violence and labor's demand for a union shop with equal vehemence.

According to the *Monitor's* analysis, the major reason for labor violence in San Francisco and in the United States was simple: socialism was rearing its ugly head. An intrinsic part of its campaign to perfect American life was an unrelenting rhetorical struggle against socialism. A large part of the paper's denunciation of the movement was due to its perceived anti-religious character. "Can a Catholic be a socialist?" it asked. The answer was straightforward: "No." The reasons were obvious, for "Catholic principles and the destructive, iconoclastic socialistic themes do not mix." The paper argued, "The Church stands for discipline, obedience, and authority, hence she is hated by the lawless, anarchist elements who are enemies of organized government." The sins of socialism were not merely religious; they were political. The *Monitor* reminded its readers that among the entities socialism had sworn to destroy were private property, the family, and the State.

The fact that socialism was of European origin allowed the *Monitor* to argue that the danger facing the nation did not stem from internal structural weaknesses of the American experiment. Rather, the perils were alien in origin. The demographic realities of San Francisco during the Progressive Era dovetailed very neatly with this set of perceptions. Three intersecting population trends operated in San Francisco during this period. First, there were proportionally fewer immigrants. While in 1890, 42.4 percent of the city's population consisted of first-generation immigrants, in 1920 the figure had dropped to 27.7 percent. In this, San Francisco was reflecting the national pattern. Whereas 14.7 percent of the entire American population had been immigrants in 1890, in 1920 only 13.2 percent were. Most other major cities saw similar population shifts: of the nine largest cities in 1890, every one contained proportionally fewer immigrants in 1920 than in 1890.

Second, the immigrants living in San Francisco in 1920 tended to be a more recently arrived set than their 1890 counterparts had been. 46.7 percent of San Francisco's 1890 immigrants had lived in the United States for over 20 years, but by 1920 that figure had dropped to 40.7 percent. San Francisco was slightly atypical in this respect. In the United States as a whole, and in such major cities as New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, the percentage increased. San Francisco immigrants were a bit "newer" than in the country at large.

Third, an increasing number of Italians came to the city. By 1920, in fact, there were more first-generation Italians than first-generation Irish in San Francisco. Over the Progressive Era, then, the Irish Catholic establishment in San Francisco acquired a new set of neighbors: a manageable number of fairly recently arrived Italians. It seemed to be a gift from St. Patrick himself.

Part of the Irish dislike for Italians stemmed from attacks on the Papal States, which the *Monitor* had denounced as early as the 1860s. But during the Progressive Era, the hostility with which official San Francisco Catholicism treated the Italians had more American roots and a more American purpose. For the Irish perceived themselves as a conservative force, ready to rescue and perfect American society. A group of people who looked different and

dangerous, yet who bore a special relation to the Irish, would allow the Irish to earn their spurs as genuine Americans.

So it was necessary that the Catholic Italians be perceived as different and dangerous, and the *Monitor* emphasized both. The Italians' lack of religious enthusiasm made them different from the city's established Catholics. As the paper put it:

But a strange disease seems often to attack the souls of our Italian citizens. They come from the land of faith . . . Yet they are, in large numbers of them, fallen away from the practice of their religion.

Few opportunities to highlight the differences between the two sets of Catholics were allowed to pass without comment. Once, on the same page in which it ran an article complaining about the deplorable behavior of some San Francisco Italians (although it did state that the bulk of the Italian population was law-abiding), the *Monitor* ran an article entitled: "Our Irish Mothers," which said in part: "Oh, wonderful Irish mothers, with Christ's own Blessed Virgin for a model the world owes you a tribute greater than your sons can ever give."

AT BEST THE TONE WAS CONDESCENDING. Speaking of the progress of a Church Americanization program, Fr. Hunt reported, "The mothers speak with great pride of now being able to shop with ease, enjoy the movies, and write all the ordinary notes to their children's teachers, excusing absences, etc. Husbands are proud of what their wives have accomplished, and children show increased respect for maternal authority."

More often though the tone was negative, for the Italians were dangerous. They had breathed the foul air of the old world and had acquired a penchant for aberrant philosophies. In the midst of welcoming the appearance of a moderate Italian journal in San Francisco, the *Monitor* complained, "Some of our Italian journalists are fair-minded men, but too many of them are products of the atheistical and anarchistic schools of Europe." It added its voice to the rural settlement movement with the following ditty:

*O, eef you wish da Dagoman
Dat com' for leeve weeth you.
To be da gooda 'Merican
An' love dees countra' too,
I ask you tak' heem by da hand,
Away from ceety street,
An' show heem first dees granda land
Where eet ees pure and sweet.*

Socialism, anarchism, or anti-Catholicism, all of them perceived Italian failings, were simply varieties of the one great sin that could not be forgiven—anti-Americanism. In one issue, the *Monitor* recounted a series of offenses:

Only a few weeks ago a gentleman, coming down the steps of one of our local churches, having made a passing visit to the Blessed Sacrament, came up with a couple of Italians—fairly well-dressed men—who were standing near the doorway. It happened that the gentleman understood Italian. This is what he heard one of the

loiterers say to his companion: "Come, let us go in and see the dirty _____" (here Our Savior's name was mentioned). The two men entered and the gentleman followed them, keeping them in sight at a distance. When they were halfway up the center aisle, they began a loud—and lewd—conversation. He who had overheard them, stepped up and accosted them: "You had better be careful"—they glared defiance—"you are not now at an anarchists' meeting." Instantly the faces of the desecraters changed. No doubt they feared they were being warned by a detective, for they hastily made their way up to the altar, falling ostentatiously on their knees, then going through a hurried show of bowing and genuflecting. It was not many days afterward when the same person who had witnessed this betrayal of anarchistic hatred overheard two well-dressed Italians passing a Catholic Church, and pointing to the cross above, "Look! Look up! Behold the _____!" (an unspeakable blasphemy). And it is only a few weeks that one of our Catholic priests was covertly threatened by a Sicilian ex-convict, recently released from San Quentin for robbing the poor box.

In the face of an influx of such dangerous types, the Irish Catholic had a unique contribution to make to American social stability. For in assimilating the Italians, the established Catholics of San Francisco would play a crucial role in "The Making of a Nation":

The Catholic Church in this country is able to do much for the foreign emigrant. In the matter of language, our advantage lies in being able to place the adult foreigner in the hands of a pastor of his own nationality and tongue, and the children of the foreigner in parochial schools where their own language is understood and often spoken The Church establishes foreign-speaking parishes as a necessity. But far from encouraging them, it restricts them and leaves nothing undone to foster the Americanization of its adherents National development, hand in hand with spiritual safety and growth, is the aim of the Church in caring for the emigrant.

Fr. Hunt echoed the same theme: "Americanization must include, not only the teaching of spoken and written English, but also imparting of knowledge of America's political institutions and an appreciation of America's ideal of democracy." The *Monitor* was proud of this Americanization process. Without the stabilizing influence of the Catholic Church, it seemed, America might be defenseless. It was a heady task, and the Irish gloried in it.

This official Catholic set of perceptions bumped into reality at the end of the Progressive period. Reality wore the face of City Charter Amendment 37, which proposed to replace the elected public school superintendent with one appointed by the Board of Education. The Amendment, part and parcel of the Progressive movement, was supported by the City's professional classes as part of their crusade for efficiency and centralization. Among the opponents of the amendment were the Irish-dominated Building Trades Council, the Irish press, and the *Monitor*.

The superintendent who stood to lose his job if the amendment was passed was Franco-Italian Alfred Roncovieri, who had been superintendent since 1906. Fluent in four languages, Roncovieri enjoyed a close relationship with many of the city's ethnic groups. For instance, when the question of teaching sex-hygiene in the schools was raised, Roncovieri actively sought out the advice of a number of women's clubs, including Catholic clubs, before deciding not to introduce that subject into the classroom. This type of operational style pleased Catholics. Fr. Hunt reported great satisfaction with the relations between his office and the public schools under Roncovieri. Since it promised to end their cordial relationship with the superintendent, Irish Catholics opposed Amendment 37. Also quite naturally, they drew the battle against the amendment along lines that were congenial to their own self-understanding. They went public with their self-image. And they lost.

The *Monitor* attacked the amendment as undemocratic, arguing, "Looked at from a broad liberal point of view, the proposed charter amendment appears to be very much like a Star Chamber proceeding." From undemocratic, it was only a short jump to anti-American. The *Monitor*, entitled one of its anti-37 editorials "PRUSSIANIZING THE SCHOOLS" and observed, "Of course, the *Examiner*, with its traditional pro-German policy, favors the amendment." In the words of the *Leader*, the paper started by Irish militant Rev. Peter C. Yorke: "UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITY TO TURN THE SCHOOLS OVER TO BIGOTS AND GRAFTERS, AND MEASURE MUST BE OVERWHELMINGLY DEFEATED."

According to the official Catholic perceptions, an anti-American Amendment was anti-Catholic, and the Catholics went looking for villains. Even though the *Monitor* had declared the nativist American Protective Association "scotch'd and killed" in San Francisco in 1912, the paper now proclaimed that the secret organization had risen from its ashes. One of its headlines ran, "A.P.A.-ISM LIFTS UGLY HEAD IN SCHOOL CONTROVERSY." On October 9, 1920, the *Leader* put this line fully, if not succinctly: "AMENDMENT 37—A.P.A. MEASURE. THE MASONS, THE PREACHERS AND THE COMBINED FORCES OF BIGOTRY MAKE DESPERATE CAMPAIGN TO GAIN ABSOLUTE CONTROL OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS. THE UNSPEAKABLE PETERSON TELLS VERY FRANKLY WHAT CATHOLICS MAY EXPECT IF AMENDMENT IS ADOPTED AT COMING ELECTION." The "Unspeakable Peterson" was Col. J. Arthur Peterson, Grand Master of the A.P.A. Beneath the headlines, the paper printed the text of a confrontation between Peterson and Roncovieri:

PETERSON: *No man can be a good Catholic and a good American at the same time, because the laws of the Vatican and the laws of the country conflict, and when they conflict, the Catholics have to say, to hell with the laws of the country, our religion comes first. When the Church rules, they must obey.*

RONCOVIERI: *So a good Catholic cannot be a good citizen?*

PETERSON: *Not if he is to be a good Catholic.*

RONCOVIERI: *You dare to say a good Catholic cannot be a good American citizen?*

PETERSON: *I have said it.*

It is hard to imagine a more direct challenge to the official Catholic perceptions. The A.P.A. was not the only villain. The *Monitor* occasionally screamed that the amendment was a plot of the rich to "Hawaiianize our glorious state and make San Francisco another Honolulu."

In addition, it claimed that the amendment would increase municipal corruption, an argument calculated for its effect on graft-conscious San Francisco. The *Monitor* at one point even said that there was nothing in the amendment to prevent the new superintendent from being appointed directly from Germany! But, beneath the Catholic arguments against the amendment, lurked the haunting, nagging fear that this was only the first step, a prelude to an all-out attack on Catholics. As the *Leader* put it, the ultimate aim of the pro-37 forces was "A LAW ABOLISHING ALL PRIVATE SCHOOLS AND COMPELLING ALL CHILDREN BETWEEN THE AGES OF SIX AND SIXTEEN TO ATTEND PUBLIC SCHOOLS."

Other events in the nation compounded the difficulties the Irish were experiencing. One such event was the failure of President Wilson to push the question of Irish independence at Versailles. Although such a move probably should not have been expected, the significant thing is that it was. Irish Catholics had talked themselves so deeply into the notion that they were *the* genuine Americans that they did not let it occur to them that the President might not be immediately responsive to their desires. The *Monitor's* bitter headline was typical of their reactions: "HOW MR. WILSON REFUSED TO AID STRUGGLING PEOPLE OF IRELAND . . . CLIPS WINGS OF SOARING REPUBLIC AFTER TEACHING INHABITANTS TO ASPIRE AFTER LIBERTY." Wilson at Paris? Sniffed the paper. "He came, he saw, he concurred." Wilson's refusal to press the Irish issue revealed a split between American government policy and the San Francisco Irish Catholic perceptions. One could not too readily assume that being a good American and a good Catholic boiled down to the same thing. At least one could not assume it in the fulsome fashion the *Monitor* had consistently proposed.

A seeming rise in anti-Catholicism also fueled the *Monitor's* fears. During the course of the war, the paper warned: "One of the after-war problems to confront Catholics will be a recrudescence of anti-Catholic bigotry." In January, 1919, it reported that "there is no longer any question that certain secret societies are determined to destroy Catholicism if they can." In March, it presented its readers with a very alarming picture. Moves were under way, it stated, in Michigan, Ohio, and Nebraska to abolish the parochial school systems.

San Francisco Irish Catholics were confused. For no reason at all, it seemed, their country and their city appeared to be turning against them. They had presented themselves to each other as the agents of social cohesion and moral leadership in the land, but the land was rudely rejecting them. The *Monitor* approvingly cited a plaintive speech by a Detroit bishop.

According to Secretary of War Baker, who is not a Catholic, we gave 35 percent of the army, 40 percent of the navy, and 50 percent

of the volunteer marines, even though we are only 17 percent of the population. To punish such super-patriotism is the maximum of baseness.

Amendment 37 seemed to be the local version of a national conspiracy. And indeed there was a definite anti-Catholic component to some of the rhetoric used by the supporters of the amendment. And, in fact, in 1922, Oregon did enact a law making public school education compulsory. The Irish were not whistling entirely in the dark.

But the significant item for us here is the terms of their counterattack. They tried to defend themselves with the perceptions they had developed. Therefore, as we have seen, they claimed that the supporters of the amendment were aliens, agitators, socialists, anarchists, and anti-Americans. Now, it was quite absurd, on the face of it, to accuse the Chamber of Commerce, the Advertising Club, the Commonwealth Club, the Downtown Association, the Real Estate Board, and the Rotary Club, all supporters of the amendment, of being radicals, anarchists, socialists, or Prussians. But the Irish Catholic self-perception left no other alternative. They had forged their own set of weapons out of nativism, bigotry, intolerance, and patriotism. They expected that a grateful nation would watch them vanquish the Dagos, and then welcome them into the fold. But the weapons were appropriated by those in whose hands they were more fitting, and on election day in 1920, amendment 37 passed. The three Assembly districts in the city with the highest percentage of Irish-born residents joined the three Assembly districts with the highest percentage of Italian-born residents in voting against the amendment. All the working-class districts in the city voted against the amendment, while all the middle-class and upper-class districts voted for it. Distasteful as it may have been, the Irish were forced to line up with their fellow immigrants and laborers.

It would be interesting to know if the ghetto mentality so often ascribed to American Catholics before 1960 expressed, at least in part, a series of defensive retreats after the failures of strategies designed to take American life by storm. One institutional phenomenon suggests that it did. In the early 1920s, San Francisco Catholic School enrollment increased at a faster rate than the city's public school enrollment. Catholic schools may well have served as a shelter for a defeated and demoralized people. In any event, San Francisco's Irish Catholics left the Progressive Era confused and uncertain. They had attempted to bridge the gap between "American" and "Catholic" by claiming for themselves a uniquely conservative and stabilizing role. But too many Americans, at that time, preferred their conservatism straight, without the Catholic chaser.

Perhaps the Irish should not be judged too harshly for trying to use the Italians as steppingstones. For, during the time they had been in the United States, they had learned the possibilities of ethnic hostilities from the hands of masters. In seeking to create and exploit racial tension, perhaps they were already more American than they knew.

* This paper rests largely on three sets of 1890-1920 primary sources: the *Monitor*, the San Francisco Catholic paper; the reports of the Archdiocesan Superintendent of Education; and United States Census Reports. Other sources, primary and secondary, were also used, but space limitations preclude citing them. A fully annotated version of the paper is available from the author.