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## Capes and Catechesis: The Use of Comic Books to Catechize Catholic Youths

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# **Capes and Catechesis: The Use of Comic Books to Catechize Catholic Youths**



Honors Thesis

Lindsey Bronder

Department: Teacher Education

Advisor: Susan Ferguson, M.S., Center for Catholic Education

April 2020

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## **Abstract**

Since the 1930s, comic books starring superheroes have been popular among youth in America. This original archival research seeks to analyze how comic books have been used in the past to catechize, or teach the Catholic faith, American Catholic youth. Using George Pfaum's comic series "Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact" (1946-1972) as an example of a Catholic comic book, this study examines and analyzes the themes and stories of the comics and how they were designed as a teaching tool. This study will also identify ways comic books can be used today as a catechetical tool.

## **Acknowledgements**

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Special thanks to my academic adviser and thesis mentor, Susan Ferguson, for always believing in me, helping to see myself as a writer, and encouraging me to grow as a catechist and researcher. I would like to thank my parents, Barb Miller, and my fiancé, Josh Krile, for their love and support. Thank you for helping me to grow into the woman I am and for helping to make my college journey so wonderful.



**University of  
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## Introduction

Zooming through the stars, a big broad-shouldered man sits drinking coffee and piloting a space shuttle. Sitting next to him, his much smaller comrade leans back in deep thought. Shown in a round speech bubble, the smaller man asks, “Erc, do you think that there’s a God?” Clearly disgruntled, the larger man declares with emphasis “Who cares!” Not discouraged, the smaller man is shown looking at the stars. In a speech bubble above him, he says, “Looking at the universe, it’s hard to imagine that there isn’t a God who created it all.” From panel to panel, the duo is shown with the larger man, Erc, giving reasons against and the smaller man, Brendan, giving reasons for the existence of a God who created the world. Showing an image of endless dominoes lined up, Brendan explains that the existence of everything in the universe is like the series of dominoes, which needs someone to start the chain reaction and get the dominoes moving. The scene presents itself as a spirited conversation between friends, ending with Brendan smiling as Erc sits in chagrin as he cannot come up with a good rebuttal to Brendan’s questioning.

This scene comes from chapter 3 of *The Truth Is Out There: Brendan & Erc in Exile*

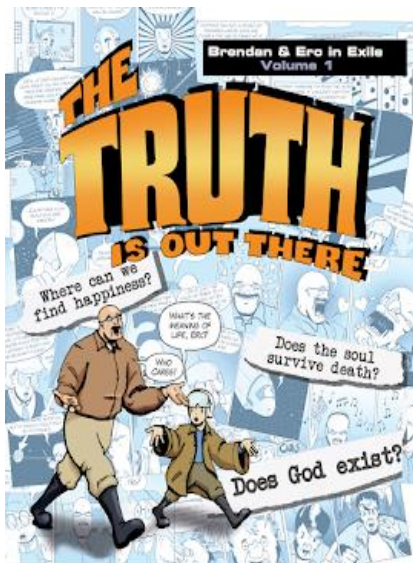


Figure 1.  
Br. Amadeus, *The Truth Is Out There: Brendan & Erc in Exile*, 2013.

*Exile* (2013). This science fiction graphic novel follows space mailmen Brendan and Erc as they have an ongoing conversation about God and religion with each other and others they meet as they travel the stars delivering mail. Beginning in a coffee shop, they examine some of life’s greatest questions like what is the meaning of life, does a person have a soul, and where to find happiness with Victor, self-described as “your average coffeehouse philosopher” (Amadeus, 2013, Chapter 1). With the help of a priest named Fr. Raphael, Brendan later concludes that he wants to become Catholic after he finds that many of the truths found in Catholic doctrines are the answers to his search for truth, happiness, and God.

Written under the pen-name Brother Amadeus, *The Truth Is Out There* was written by an Eastern Catholic Maronite Monk of Adoration. Even more unusual, the book was published by the well-known media company Catholic Answers and has received the *Nihil Obstat* and *Imprimatur*, which are official declarations from the Catholic Church that the book is free of doctrinal and moral errors (p. 3). In the introduction, Brother Amadeus describes that he was inspired to write the graphic novel after realizing that the ‘greatest problem’ among his generation of Catholics is that many have grown up and received Catholic education yet do not have a good understanding or appreciation of the truths of the Catholic Church. In an expression of hope, he ends with, “May the reader catch a glimpse of that great Truth in these pages, be captivated by his beauty and grow in love for the Catholic Faith” (Amadeus, 2013, Introduction).

Brother Amadeus is not the first to use the comic book format for the purposes of teaching and cultivating a love of the Catholic faith. By the time of its publication in 2013, American Catholics had been producing religious comic books for more than 75 years. Since the rise of comic books in the late 1930s, American Catholics have had significant influence on the comic book industry through censorship as well as its sponsorship of the medium. With popular comic series like Superman and Batman, many American youth looked up to these superheroes as examples of justice and American patriotism. These figures were considered so influential on American youth that in the 1940s and 1950s efforts were made to censor such comics, such as the National Organization for Decent Literature (NODL) by American Catholic bishops (Cadegan, 2001, p. 258). In response, Pflaum Inc. of Dayton, Ohio, created the *Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact* (1946-1973) comic series to promote justice, American patriotism, and Roman Catholic teachings in a way in keeping with NODL. Primarily sold and distributed through Catholic grade schools, *Treasure Chest* was clearly intended as a teaching tool. The purpose of this paper is to examine how comic books have been used in the past and how they can be used today to catechize or teach the faith to American youth.

## *Defining Comics*

Recently, comic books and graphic novels have gained greater recognition as a valid literary form both in American culture as well as the classroom. Comics as an artistic medium has had a rich history and has a variety of definitions. Here are a few:

- “*Sequential art*” – Will Eisner, arguably the most influential cartoonist and considered the first graphic novelist for *A Contract with God*, in his book *In Comics and Sequential Art* (2008).
- “*Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.*” – Scott McCloud, from his authoritative book *Understanding Comics* (1993, p. 9).
- “*Co-mix*” to refer to art accompanied by brief text - Art Spiegelman, Pulitzer-Prize winning author of the graphic novel *Maus* (cited in Shao, 2014).
- “*Comics-comic books, comic strips, and graphic novels-are media that use a combination of sequential art and text in order to create narrative meaning for the audience. This combination of words and images-multimodality-works to create meaning in very particular and distinctive ways; in a multimodal text, meaning is created through words, visuals, and the combination of the two in order to achieve effects and meanings that that would not be possible in either a strictly alphabetic or strictly visual text.*” – Dale Jacobs in *Graphic Encounters* (2013, p. 5-6)

For the purposes of this paper, the terms “comics,” “comic books,” and “graphic novels” are used almost interchangeably. Graphic novels are longer often book-length stories or narratives told in a comic book style. Graphic novels have become increasingly more recognized as being more complex and having the same content level of books and with the added benefit of a visual component (Brozo, Meyer, and Moorman, 2014, p. 5). Comics and graphic novels can aid an individual in their reading by presenting the content in context with the use of visual aids alongside the printed text. The focus of this study will be on comics printed in English and published in the United States with a focus on those intended to teach the Catholic or Christian faith.

## *Scope*

The scope of this investigation will include research into the origins and history of Catholic comics in the United States (U.S.). For the purposes of this investigation, Roman Catholicism was chosen as the religion of focus and the term ‘Catholic’ will refer to Roman Catholic. According to the *National Directory for Catechesis*, catechesis refers to the ministry of the Catholic Church to pass on the teachings of Christ which involves efforts to form people into disciples and an education in the faith (USCCB, 2003, p. 6). To discuss and answer the research questions, catechesis will refer to teaching the Catholic faith. This study will primarily involve original archival research into the *Treasure Chest* comic series as an example of how comic books have been used in the past to catechize American Catholic youth. I will define ‘youth’ for the purpose of this study as any school-age child roughly age 10 to 18. This age range was chosen because pre-teens and teens are often the target audience of superhero comic books and movies, which are typically rated PG-13.<sup>1</sup> While there has been research into comic books and graphic novels as teaching tools, there is limited research on its use in the present and past as a tool for catechesis. As I conclude, I will examine some of the current research related to comic books and graphic novels as a teaching tool. Finally, I would like to suggest how comic books and graphic novels can be used to catechize today.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the movie *Wonder Woman* (2017) was rated PG-13 “for sequences of violence and action, and some suggestive content” (*Wonder Woman* biography, n.d.).



## The Jewish Roots of Comics

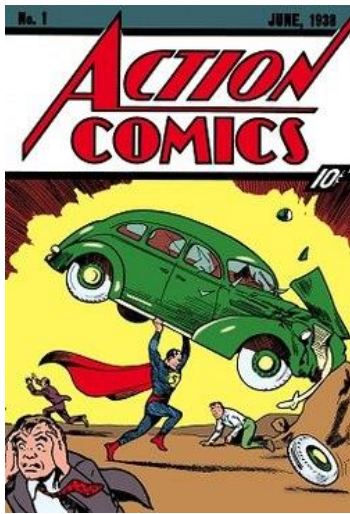


Figure 2.  
Joe Shuster, *Action Comics*  
#1, June 1938.

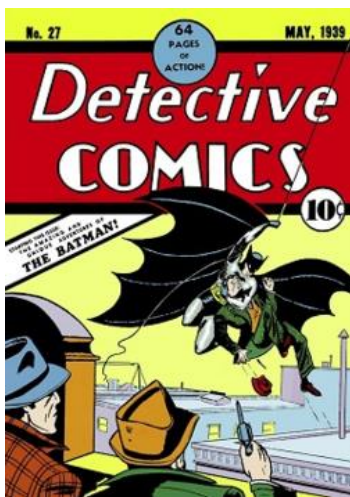


Figure 3.  
Bob Kane, *Detective Comics*  
#27, May 1939.

In June of 1938, comic creators Jerry Siegel's and Joe Shuster's character, named Superman, graced the cover of National Comics' (later to be DC Comics) first issue of *Action Comics* (Fronk, 2016, p. 8). As the first superhero, Superman was a quick success that affected the comic industry forever as comics would become mainly associated with superheroes because of Superman (Fronk, 2016, p. 9). With the success of Superman, other superheroes appeared on the scene including Batman, who first appeared in *Detective Comics* in 1939 (Lepore, 2014, p. xi). As comic books starring superheroes gained popularity, there was a push for national unity among American citizens in the face of World War II (WWII) which began in 1939 and ended in 1945. In 1941, Wonder Woman debuted just months before the U.S. officially declared war on Germany and entered WWII. As described in Jill Lepore's *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (2014), William Moulton Marston originally created Wonder Woman as feminist propaganda with the intent "to fight fascism with feminism" (p. 200). For example, Wonder Woman fought her nemesis Dr. Psycho, who was a fascist depicted as a mutant with the heads of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito (Lepore, 2014). In addition to Wonder Woman, superheroes like Hawkman and all the other members of the Justice Society joined the armed services to fight in WWII (Lepore, 2014, p. 204). In this way, comic books during this time period primarily focused on the adventures of superheroes with the intention to promote American patriotism and fight fascist ideals.

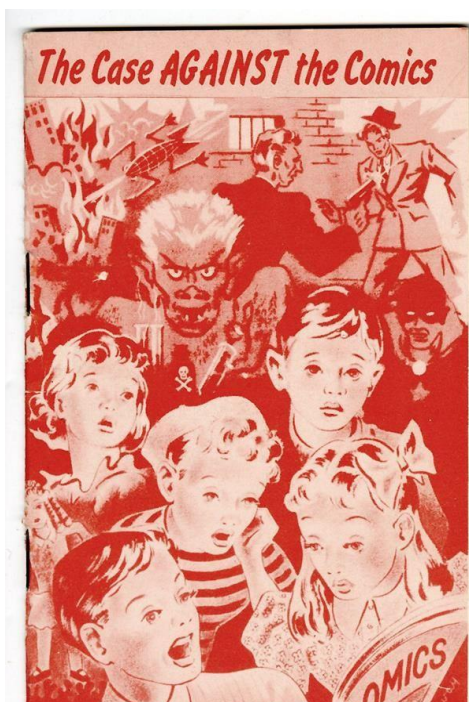
Considering WWII, the overemphasis on fighting fascism and American patriotism found in superhero comics has been attributed to the many Jewish creators and publishers in the comic book industry. These include big names like Siegel and Shuster (creators of Superman), Bob Kane (creator of Batman), and Stan Lee (long time editor and writer of Timely later known as Marvel Comics) who were Jewish (Coates, 2017, p. 455). While their works often avoided overt references to their Jewish roots, many scholars and analysts have noted that these early superheroes reflected Jewish influences such as how Siegel and Schuster may have drawn from the Jewish legends of the Golem to create their superhuman protector (Coates, 2017, p. 455). With many Jews facing discrimination during this time period, the prevalence and influence of Jews in the comic book industry is notable because as Will Eisner explains:

*One of the reasons we Jews drifted into comic-book business is that most of the comic-book publishers were Jewish. So there was no discrimination there. This business was brand new. It was the bottom of the social ladder, and it was wide open to anybody.* (qtd. in Fronk, 2016, p. 57)

The comic book industry offered opportunities for Jewish artists to enter the art world without suffering the discrimination they often faced from mainstream publishing. Although quiet, there are undeniable Jewish roots and influence on the founding and creation of the comic book industry and superheroes.

## Comics, Censorship, & Anti-Catholicism

Despite these Jewish roots and influences, several critics compared these superheroes to fascists. In addition to concerns about superheroes being fascist, there were increasing concerns regarding the morals, especially violence, presented in comic books and the potentially negative impact on young readers. These concerns were held by religious institutions, especially the Catholic Church who initially led the opposition against comics. In the 1945 *Time* magazine article “Are Comics Fascist?,” Walter J. Ong, a Jesuit priest and professor of English at Regis College, compared Superman to the *ubermensch* (overman)<sup>2</sup> saying, “Everything is centered on one man—the leader, the hero, the duce, the Fuhrer” (p. 67). In 1944, the Catechetical Guild Educational Society produced a pamphlet entitled “The Case Against Comics” warning of the negative impacts of reading comics on American youth including how:



**Figure 4.**  
Artist unknown, *The Case Against Comics*,  
1944.

*A large number of comic books depict the heroic adventures of one or more characters whose philosophy may only be described as un-American and in a few instances, anarchistic. The vigilante spirit is rife in the comics: the gestapo method is glorified... It is neither Christian nor American to permit the young to be taught in this way the pernicious totalitarian doctrine that the end justifies the means... Even juvenile characters in the comic books engage in un-American activities of this nature. Fictitious “junior commando” groups bear a strong resemblance to the bands of child militarists in Nazi Germany.*  
(qtd. in Fronk, 2016, p. 12).

It is interesting to note that the Catechetical Guild Educational Society’s main criticism is that comics are “un-American.”

<sup>2</sup> The *ubermensch* (overman) was a superior human proposed by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and later appropriated by the Nazi Party in their pursuit of the Aryan race (Lepore, 2014, p. 255).

These concerns about the morals of comics are considered by many scholars to be irrational, as even the first appearance of Superman in *Action Comics* explained his purpose as: “Superman! Champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!” (qtd. in Jacobs, 2013, p. 49). Marston, creator of Wonder Woman, countered such arguments and defended his Wonder Woman claiming:

*And the two wishes behind Superman are certainly the soundest of all; they are, in fact, our national aspirations of the moment-to develop unbeatable national might, and to use this great power, when we get it, to protect innocent, peace-loving people from destructive ruthless evil.* (qtd. in Lepore, 2014, p. 185).

This calls to mind the words “With great power comes great responsibility” that would later come to be associated with superheroes but was not yet popular (*Spider-Man*, 2002).

However, these concerns about what media American Catholic youth were exposed to are echoed in the publications of the American Catholic bishops. In their 1941 pastoral letter called the “Crisis of Christianity,” American Catholic bishops emphasized the threats posed by Nazism and communism and expressed their concerns “about the future of supernatural religion in our country” threatened by the growing “evils of ‘false doctrine, immorality, disbelief, and reborn paganism’” (Mooney, et al., 1941, p. 376). According to the bishops, these evils threatened youth the most and there is a need to “encourage youth to realize the constructive need of Christian doctrine and Christian discipline” (Mooney, et al., 1941, p. 376). In their 1947 pastoral letter “Secularism,” the bishops outlined how the increasing secularization creates a moral decay with the denial of God and the Church’s decreasing influence on the moral formation of youth (Dougherty et al., 1947, p. 404). The follow-up pastoral letter “The Christian in Action” outlines constructive efforts that Catholics could undertake to combat secularization and emphasizes the relationship between religion and American citizenship in promoting national morality (Dougherty et al., 1948, p. 411-12). In their 1961 pastoral letter “Unchanging Duty in a Changing World”, the bishops claim that:

*[t]he evidences of our moral decline are everywhere to be seen: in the alarming increase in crime, particularly among the young; in the sensational treatment of violence and sexuality in literature, on the stage, screen and television...* (Spellman et al. , 1961, p. 536).

These statements seemed to show how there was a growing fear of the American Catholic youth falling away or losing their faith and morals as they became increasingly more part of and surrounded by secular society. When confronted with overwhelming culture, parents and the Catholic Church were concerned over the seeming little influence they had in shaping the minds of American youth and blamed modern media for contributing to the apparent moral decline in the U.S.

Movies and comic books were considered to be so influential on American youth that in the 1940s and 1950s efforts were made to censor them, such as the Legion of Decency and National Organization for Decent Literature (NODL) founded by American Catholic bishops (Cadegan, 2001, p. 258). While the Legion of Decency was established in 1934 to censor movies, NODL was established in 1938 to censor paperback literature, especially comic books (Cadegan, 2001, p. 252, 257). NODL sought to promote good morals and steer readers away from reading material that was considered morally objectionable or indecent. NODL created a code as seen in Figure 5 that could be used to evaluate whether a publication was indecent and, therefore, place it on their list of publications that were disapproved.<sup>3</sup> For example, NODL put *Sensation Comics* featuring the adventures of Wonder Woman on its list of “Publications Disapproved for Youth” because it violated Point 4 with Wonder Woman “not sufficiently dressed” (Lepore, 2014, p. 203).

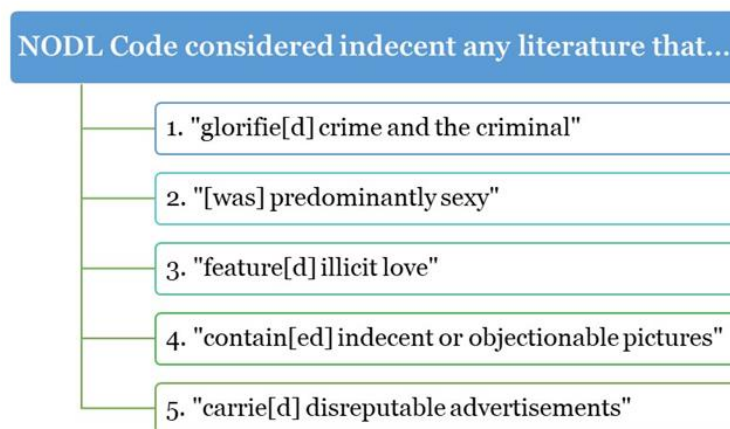


Figure 5: NODL Code. Cadegan, 2001, p. 258-259. Courtesy of Lindsey Bronder.

<sup>3</sup> This list was published monthly in the *Acolyte* from 1939 to 1957, and then in the *NODL Newsletter* beginning in 1957 which were all published by Our Sunday Visitor Press in Indiana (O'Connor, 1995, p. 394).

NODL's mission reflected what was outlined by the Catechetical Guild Educational Society in "The Case Against Comics" and by the American Catholic bishops in the pastoral letters. NODL was even founded and headed by John F. Noll, who was Bishop of Fort Wayne, Indiana, and listed as an author of many of the pastoral letters after World War II (Cadegan, 2001, p. 256).<sup>4</sup> In the 1957 pastoral letter "Censorship," the bishops praise NODL and explained that the need for censorship is seen in the moral decay of the U.S. (Mooney et al., 1957, p. 501). According to Catholic historian Dr. Una Cadegan (2001),

*While left-wing defenders of American democracy sought to maximize American freedom as a safeguard against the growing threat of totalitarianism, conservative defenders of the same system hoped to temper freedom-or 'license,' as they would have said-with moral safeguards against the relativism that they believed permitted totalitarianism to take root. (p. 254)*

In other words, the goal for many conservatives, often including Catholics, was to combat fascism and communism by preventing moral relativism.

Although NODL intended to combat fascism and communism, many criticized their efforts as fascist and communist. In 1956, John Fischer wrote an editorial that claimed NODL was "conducting a shocking attack on the rights of their fellow citizens... an un-American activity which is as flagrant as anything the Communist party ever attempted" (qtd. in Cadegan, 2001, p. 267). Paul Blanshard, arguably the leader of the anti-Catholic movement post-World War II, opposed NODL's censorship and the efforts of the Catholic bishops in politics claiming it went against the separation of church and state that is crucial to democracy and thereby made Catholicism un-American (Cadegan, 2001, p. 269). In this way, the pushback to NODL also reflected some of the subtle anti-Catholic sentiments prevalent in the U.S after WWII. Catholics during this time period had to seemingly reconcile their Catholic and American identity to show one could be a Catholic American citizen.

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<sup>4</sup> Bishop John F. Noll was listed as an author on the pastoral letters "The Crisis of Christianity" (1941), "Secularism" (1947), "The Christian in Action" (1948), "The Child Citizen of Two Worlds" (1950), etc. Noll, however, was not listed as an author of "Censorship" (1957). Noll served as the chair of the episcopal committee for NODL from 1938 through 1954 (O'Connor, 1995, p. 392).

In their 1957 “Statement on Censorship by Private Organizations and the National Organization for Decent Literature”, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) accepted NODL’s goal of informing Catholics but objected to the threat of boycotts by NODL members as well as the use of NODL lists by civil authorities<sup>5</sup> (Cadegan, 2001, p. 265). In response to Fisher, Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray wrote that he agreed that NODL’s lists were misused by civil authorities but affirmed the validity of their mission. According to Murray, NODL was working towards the Catholic duty “to inject the Catholic tradition of rationality into a mass democracy that is rapidly slipping its moorings in reason” (cited in Cadegan, 2001, p. 273). Although called a censor, *America* editors emphasized that NODL was not,

*a legislative body; it can lay down no laws. The purpose of its ratings is to remind Catholics of obligations they already have by virtue of the natural moral law.*  
(cited in Cadegan, 2001, p. 272)

In order to distance themselves from the negative connotation of censorship, NODL emphasized how the obligations to read ‘decent’ materials in keeping with the code was “freely chosen, not imposed” because NODL members voluntarily joined (Cadegan, 2001, p. 274). Individuals would become members by opting to pledge to not buy or read any materials that NODL disapproved of (O’Connor, 1995, p. 396).

The pushback to NODL’s efforts is interesting because secular efforts also had a significant influence on the comic book industry. Psychiatrist Fredric Wertham’s article “Horror in the Nursery” and his seminal book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1953) were instrumental in pushing the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency into action investigating the comic book industry in 1954 (Jacobs, 2013, p. 108-109). In his book, Wertham argued and provided ‘evidence’ that the violence and crime depicted in comics had a negative effect on the psychology of American youth and could lead to juvenile delinquency and illiteracy (Lepore, 2014, p. 264-265; Jacobs, 2013, p. 19). Having become the spokesman for the crusade against comics, Wertham during the Senate Subcommittee hearings served on the prosecuting side while William Gaines, owner and

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<sup>5</sup> Some local public officials used the NODL Code to determine decency of materials such as Charles Gannon, a prosecutor in Lake County, Indiana in 1944. In 1943, Postmaster General Frank Walker was accused in a *Washington Post* article of colluding with his fellow Catholics in NODL to exclude certain ‘obscene’ materials from using second-class mailing privileges. (O’Connor, 1995, p. 397)

publisher of Entertaining Comics (EC), served as defendant (Fronk, 2016, p. 27). Realizing the constitutional challenges of legislating print, no government legislation came of the hearings. However, recognizing the public demand, the comic book industry formed in 1954 the Comic Magazine Association of America as a trade association for the purpose of self-imposing an industry-wide Comics Code. Enforcement was ensured as distribution companies would refuse to sell comics that did not display the Comics Code Authority Seal signifying that the contents adhered to the Code. While there were many defenders of comic books, Wertham's critiques, the Senate Subcommittee's hearings, and the subsequent self-imposed Comics Code show that comic books were controversial in public opinion and that NODL and Catholics were not the only ones concerned about them during this time period. After the adoption of the Comics Code, NODL even stopped including comic books on its list of publications that were disapproved (O'Connor, 1995, p. 400). However, the censorship, often fueled by religious conservatives like *Archie* publisher John Goldwater<sup>6</sup>, led to religion being viewed negatively by comic book enthusiasts and spurred the development of the Underground Comix<sup>7</sup> movement.

Although they exerted a significant influence during the 1940s and 1950s, NODL's influence by the 1960s, as the Second Vatican Council occurred, decreased and Catholic censorship was no longer perceived as a significant threat. In 1966, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared that the Church could still condemn reading materials but now the decision was left to the conscience of individual Catholics (O'Connor, 1995, p. 407). NODL's influence decreased as "the change from a system of canonical prohibition ... to a system of moral admonition [was] far-reaching and profound" (qtd. in O'Connor, 1995, p. 407). In December of 1969, the U.S. Catholic Conference announced the closure of NODL seemingly as a result of administration reorganization (O'Connor, 1995, p. 408-9). However, the NODL's public image was

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<sup>6</sup> As published of *Archie* comics, John Goldwater was instrumental in the establishment and enforcement of the Comics Code. In the 1970s, Goldwater licensed *Archie* to Spire Comics for use in overtly evangelical Christian comics. (Jacobs, 2013, p. 128)

<sup>7</sup> The Underground Comix movement was developed in the 1960s as a counterculture to the predominantly child-friendly comics made under the Comics Code with the 'x' emphasizing it being X-rated. Many Underground Comix creators made comix that were a satirization of religious topics. (Fronk, 2016, p. 28-29).



negative, even among Catholics, as it was regarded more as a coercive organization (O'Connor, 1995, p. 409). Although other interdenominational organizations would come about, no Catholic group or organization since NODL has had as great of an influence on media in the U.S.

## Comics and Catechesis

As seen in the efforts of NODL, many Catholics saw value in comics but wished to substitute what they saw as 'indecent' or inappropriate for more appropriate and overtly Christian. With the use of art and visuals to teach the faith so deeply rooted in Catholic tradition and history, Jacobs (2013) notes that it is unsurprising the Catholic Church became a pioneer in sponsoring comics as a literacy to teach the faith (p. 132-33). The Catholic Church was one of the largest distributors of comics for religious education in the 1950s as churches across America had their greatest attendance in history.

### *Picture Stories from the Bible*

By the time he published this first overtly religious comic book, Max Gaines was well-known in the comic book industry having marketed the 'first' comic books *Funnies on Parade and Famous Funnies* to Proctor & Gamble in 1933 and having helped discover Superman (Jacobs, 2013, p. 128-129; Fronk, 2016, p. 15). First published in 1942 under the DC imprint, *Picture Stories from the Bible* was a comic series that told Biblical stories in chronological order split into two volumes: the Old Testament and the New Testament (Jacobs, 2013, p. 130; Fronk, 2016, p. 15). Himself a Jew, Max Gaines expressed in a 1943 *Forbes* article that he was inspired to create this comic book adaptation of the Bible after learning that half of American children received no religious education (Fronk, 2016, p. 16). In the back cover of the second issue, Gaines wrote,

*We see that the Bible lives today. Much of our civilization is based on its ideas... A book which has endured so many centuries and has so powerfully affected the lives of so many people must commend itself to every American boy and girl.*  
(qtd. in Jacobs, 2013, p. 132).

Advocating for more of a cultural literacy of the Bible, Gaines worked to provide access to the Biblical texts he viewed as so foundational to the education of American youth.

Gaines' nonsectarian intent is reflected in his use of an ecumenical advisory board of 11 members from leadership of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faiths to ensure an ecumenical approach to the Bible (Jacobs, 2013, p. 132).

Although at first operating at a loss, *Picture Stories from the Bible* was a financial success in the long run as “the first of four issues and a subsequent reprinted combined compilation sold one million copies in 1943” (Fronk, 2016, p. 16). After leaving National Comics to form Education Comics (EC) in 1946, Gaines kept the rights to *Picture Stories from the Bible* and it continued to be a success and foundation for his new company (Fronk, 2016, p. 15). After Max Gaines tragically passed away in 1947, his son William Gaines took over ceasing production of *Picture Stories from the Bible* and changing the company to *Entertaining Comics*, which would begin creating the crime and horror comics that led to him being a defendant in the Senate Subcommittee hearings in 1954 (Fronk, 2016, p. 16-17).

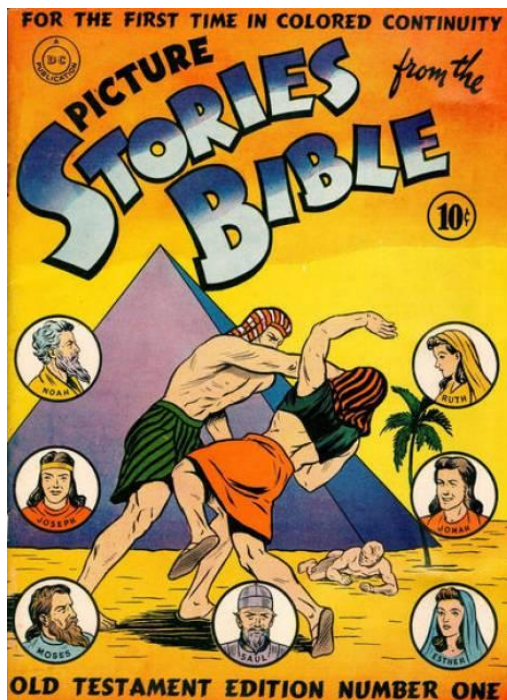


Figure 6.  
Cameron, *Picture Stories from the Bible*  
Vol. 1 #1, 1942.

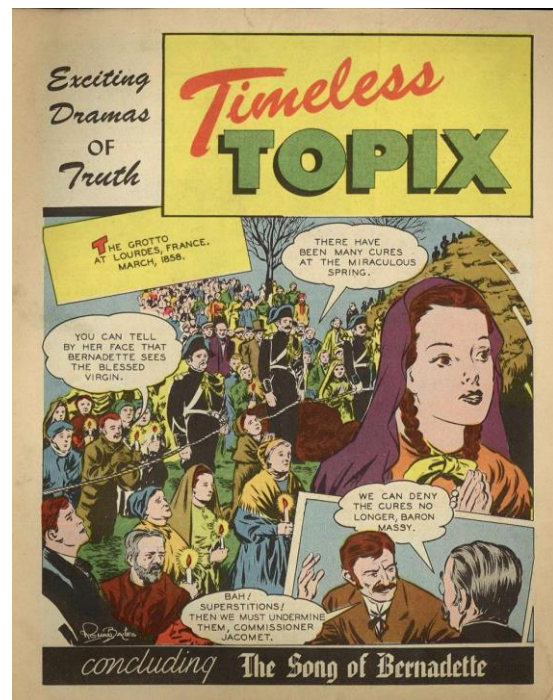


Figure 7.  
Baltes, *Timeless Topix* Vol. 2 #4, 1943.

### ***(Timeless) Topix***

Ironically, the Catechetical Guild Educational Society published some of the first Catholic comics in 1942, which was two years before their publication of “The Case Against Comics” in 1944. Entitled *Timeless Topix* but shortened to *Topix*, the comic series was a monthly anthology of stories of the saints, Biblical story adaptations, historical stories of American Catholic role models, and more relatable current fictional stories (Fronk, 2016, p. 13). Primarily sold and distributed only through Catholic grade schools, *Topix* was clearly intended as teaching tool and was popular with circulation having rose from 200,000 to 600,000 in one year (Fronk, 2016, p. 13). This is the first example of the Catholic Church’s (through the Catechetical Guild) sponsorship of the comic medium as a catechetical tool.

### ***Treasure Chest: A Lost Catholic Treasure***

In response to the need for materials for the growing American Catholic school system, George A. Pflaum Sr. created the Pflaum Publishing Company (Co.) in 1885. Pflaum Publishing Co. was located in Dayton, Ohio where Pflaum Sr. was a resident. Pflaum Sr. first published a weekly newspaper called the *Young Catholic Messenger* that was distributed to students in the Catholic school system (Shreffler, 2017). As Pflaum Sr. got older, his son George A. Pflaum Jr. also helped to lead the company as president of the company while Pflaum Sr. served as chairman of the board according to a *New York Times* obituary (40). Pflaum Jr. would expand the *Young Catholic Messenger* to also have a *Junior Catholic Messenger* for older students and the *Our Little Messenger* for younger students. Pflaum Jr. also started the *Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact* comic book series in 1946.

Primarily sold and distributed through Catholic grade schools, *Treasure Chest* (TC) was clearly intended as a teaching tool, even including a teacher’s edition with lesson plans from 1959-1965. For most of the time they ran, TC was published every two weeks from September through May in an effort to parallel the traditional school year in the U.S. Although Catholic school enrollment peaked in the early 1960s, the decline of Catholic school enrollment in the 1970s led also to the decline of TC, whose readership

depended on Catholic schools (NCEA, 2018; Blankenship, 2010, p. 65). Despite not being the first of its kind, TC is considered to have been the most successful Catholic comic series because it ran longer and produced more issues over its 27 volumes than other comics (Blankenship, 2010, p. 65). In this way, TC seems to be the leading example of how comic books have been used in the past to catechize American Catholic youth.

Although truly a Catholic treasure as arguably the leading (and most easily accessible) example of how comic books have been used in the past to catechize American Catholic youth, there have been few scholars who have written about TC in-depth. Dr. Anne Blankenship, Associate Professor at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, did so in “Catholic American Citizenship: Prescriptions for Children from *Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact, 1946-1973*” found in *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (2010). However, Blankenship (2010) only focuses on the issues of *Treasure Chest* before Vatican II in the 1960s thereby leaving a whole decade or so of volumes out (p. 64).

This study expands on Blankenship’s findings and primarily involved original archival research into the *Treasure Chest* comic series as an example of how comic books have been used in the past to catechize American Catholic youth. Although there is limited information recorded on the family and statistics on the influence of the company on American Catholics, Pflaum Publishing Co. and the Pflaum family have great significance for American Catholics of Dayton, Ohio. Not only were the Pflaums residents, Pflaum Sr. was also a graduate of the University of Dayton and later would receive an honorary doctor of letter degree from UD. The U.S. Catholic Special Collection in Roesch Library at the University of Dayton is one of few to have a complete collection of the *Treasure Chest* comic series. The more than 500 of issues of *Treasure Chest* found in the archival collection at the University of Dayton has afforded me a unique opportunity to examine the content for themes and use of the comic book as a catechetical tool.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Catholic University of America’s (CUA) American Catholic Research Center and University Archives also has a complete collection of *Treasure Chest* both in print and available digitally online. The images used in this paper are from this already digitized collection.

## Treasure Chest: An ‘Approved’ Catholic Comic

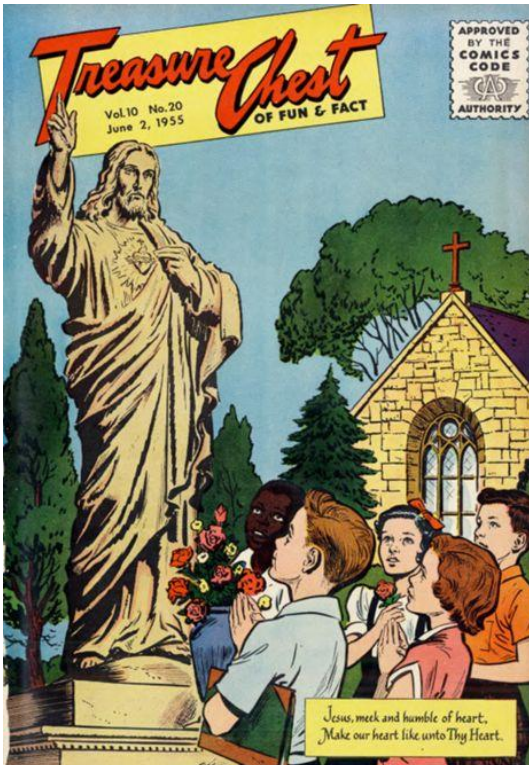


Figure 8.

Pflaum, *Treasure Chest*, Vol. 1 #1, 1946a. Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

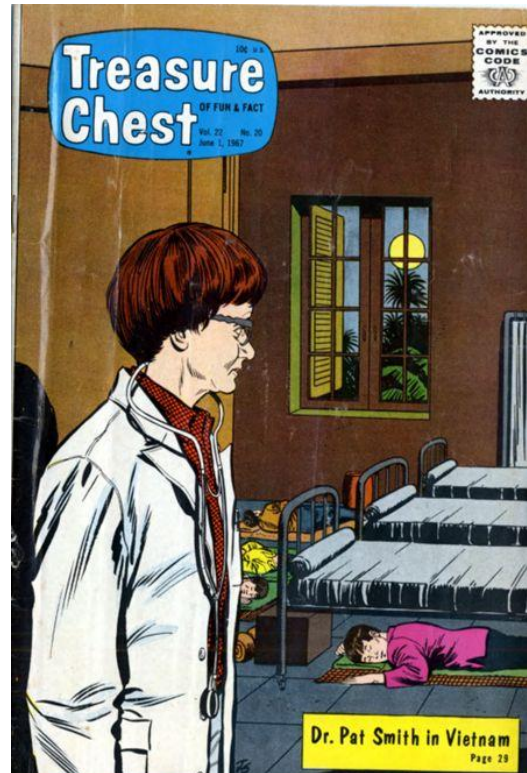
As seen in Figure 8, Pflaum (1946a) created and marketed TC as “the new, approved-type of comic magazine” (p. 32). TC was to be “a worthwhile comic magazine as a counteractive to the objectionable type” (Pflaum, 1946a, p. 32). This language reflects the language used by NODL, who used terms like ‘indecent’ and ‘objectionable’ rather than ‘immoral’ or ‘obscene’ that were legal terms and could lead to prosecution for violating First Amendment rights (Cadegan, 2001, p. 260-261). In the story series “The Cost of a Lie”, a kid named Arthur goes to see a movie despite his mother telling him he could not because it was rated ‘B’, or objectionable in part, by the Legion of Decency (Pflaum, 1946c-d). After choosing to see the movie and lie about it, Arthur must deal with the guilt and negative consequences leading him to conclude that “a lie is just like a snowball” that continues to grow and cost him even more (Pflaum, 1946d, p. 19). While these ties are not explicit, the language used and references to censorship efforts suggest that Pflaum Inc. was aware of and working to create TC so that it was in keeping and promoted the mission of the major Catholic censors like the Legion of Decency and NODL.

As NODL's influence declined and the establishment of the Comics Magazine Association of America, TC began to bear the Comics Code Authority Seal starting with their Volume 10, Issue No. 20. TC issues would bear this seal of approval until 1967, with the last issue being the Volume 22 Issue No. 20.



**Figure 9.**  
Schaller, *Treasure Chest* Volume 10 #20, 1955. Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

The first TC issue to bear the CMAA seal of approval in the top righthand corner.



**Figure 10.**  
Langdon, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 22 #20, 1976b. Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

The last TC issue to bear the CMAA seal of approval in the top righthand corner.

## ***Treasure Chest: Comics and Catholic American Citizenship***

Although it is not clear whether it was Sr. or Jr., George Pflaum is also credited with contributing to the Catholic University of America (CUA)'s Commission on American Citizenship. The Commission on American Citizenship was created in 1938 in response to Pope Pius XI's letter to CUA giving them the mission to encourage American Catholics that their religious and civic duties were not mutually exclusive and so they could be good American Catholic citizens (CUA). According to Dr. Anne Blankenship, "The Commission had one central goal: educate American Catholics about proper citizenship from a young age." When tasked to create educational materials, the Commission collaborated with Pflaum to use the Pflaum publications, like the *Young Catholic Messenger*, to include lessons on citizenship and Christian living in the U.S. Pflaum also helped to create and publish a textbook called "Faith and Freedom", which was used in over 5,000 Catholic schools according to Blankenship. Although these are not found in the U.S. Catholic Special Collection at the University of Dayton, the involvement of Pflaum in the Commission on American Citizenship helps to show the extent of the Pflaum Publishing Co.'s influence on catechesis during the 20th century and helps explain the Pflaum publications emphasis on patriotism and citizenship.

As outlined by historian Dr. Anne Blankenship (2010), TC's principal theme was American citizenship and emphasized that children could be good Catholic American citizens. She claims that TC stories modeled behaviors and gave explicit 'prescriptions' or instructions on both civil and religious duties in an effort to show how they can overlap and connect. Through my archival research, I have identified in TC key prescriptions or characteristics of a good American Catholic citizen like being anti-communist, being patriotic and defenders of democracy, having and sticking to your morals, as well as being part of a 'melting pot.'

## **American Catholic Citizens: Part of a Melting Pot**

In order to determine what makes a good Catholic American citizen, Blankenship (2010) claims that TC had to first address the question “What is America?” (p. 65). According to Blankenship (2010), TC “regularly defined America by freedom, democracy, and multiculturalism” (p. 64). She offers as an example the Volume 5 series “It Happens Here: A Story of Young Citizens”, which shows Catholic immigrants as they come to the U.S. and learn more about being American citizens (Blankenship, 2010, p. 66).

Blankenship (2010) also offers as an example the Volume 10 series “We Built America” that was sponsored by the Catholic University of America’s Commission for American Citizenship (p. 67). The series follows a group of students as they befriend two new students whose national origins are a mystery. After a girl remarks that “it may take them a little time to get used to the American way of life,” a boy reminds her that it will not take them long because “remember it was people who came here from foreign countries who made the American way of life” (Bren, 1954, p. 20). In an effort to welcome the new students, the civics club plans to introduce them to the ‘American way of life’ or American culture and get to know them better by inviting them to have dinner with their families to show them the kinds of people who built America, since many of their older family members were immigrants or children of immigrants. At the dinners, the families explain “the fact that true Americanism is a matter of spirit, not of birth” and tell stories of the contributions to American culture by their ethnicity, including Spanish, Italian, German, British, Chinese, Irish, Polish, and Norwegian Americans (Eaglin, 1954, p. 16). The new students remark that “understanding different people is just a matter of getting to know them” and eventually bring home the civic club members for dinner to reveal that they are Native American (Eaglin, 1955b, p. 31). The series emphasized how Native Americans or “those who were already here have also helped to weave the American pattern” and even showed newly arrived immigrants to “point out that the pattern is not finished. There are people coming even in our times who will add new designs to the pattern” (Eaglin, 1955d, p. 28; Eaglin, 1955c, p. 13). The emphasis on



these contributions seems to be to show readers that American culture is very complex and dynamic.



Figure 11.  
 Eaglin, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 10 #10, 1955a.  
 Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

The students discuss how none of them are pure English and that American culture is a “mixture” of different ethnic contributions.

Similarly, the later Volume 18 series “America: The Melting Pot” highlights the contributions of different ethnicities to American culture because “sometimes we forget that our country is a great melting pot of people of many different races, working together and contributing to America’s greatness” (Pehowski, 1962a, p. 18-19). What distinguished “America: The Melting Pot” from “We Built America” is the more direct statements addressing the discrimination and prejudice that ethnicities have faced in America. Considering how the series ran during Civil Rights movement, their statement in Figure 12 that “Laws protected [blacks’] rights but couldn’t always stop prejudice” and that “time proved [blacks’] to be good neighbors” was revolutionary (Pehowski, 1962b, 18-19).



Figure 12.  
 Pehowski, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 18 #19, 1962b, p. 18-19.  
 Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

Another “America: The Melting Pot” highlighted how Jewish immigrants faced discrimination and prejudice similar to Catholics in America (Ostendorf, 1951, p. 19). Readers were encouraged to interact with and befriend immigrants like Jews in order to help them assimilate into the ‘melting pot’ and because this exposure would also decrease prejudice (Ostendorf, 1951, p. 19). These call to mind the “the fact that true Americanism is a matter of spirit, not of birth” and so what unites citizens is their American identity, not their religion or race (Eaglin, 1954, p. 16).

Although TC encouraged assimilation into American culture, they acknowledged the contributions by different ethnicities and encouraged Americans to preserve their cultural traditions. Blankenship (2010) contrasts TC’s version of a melting pot with the story of Wonder Woman, who upon coming to America completely assimilates as seen in how she only speaks English and never refers to her Greek heritage or former country, except to claim America is superior to Amazonia (p. 68). According to Blankenship (2010), TC “modified the usual interpretation of the melting pot metaphor” in their promotion of tolerance and multiculturalism as characteristics of America (p. 68).

Similarly, the Volume 6 series “Where Do We Stand?” sponsored by the Commission on American Citizenship that highlighted Catholic social teachings included a story on racial injustice and prejudice. Key points were summarized at the end of the story such as in Figure 13 the Catholic Church’s condemnation of racial prejudice because “there is no such thing as ‘race’ as most people understand it” and “there are no such things as races that are born ‘inferior’ or ‘superior’” (Ostendorf, 1950, p. 13).

**TREASURE CHEST** 13

**S**OMETIMES WE MUST FOLLOW LOCAL CUSTOMS AND LAWS - EVEN THOUGH IT IS WRONG. FOR EXAMPLE, THESE CHILDREN HAVE NO FAMILIES. IF WE DIDN'T TAKE CARE OF THEM THIS WAY, WE SHOULDN'T BE ABLE TO TAKE CARE OF THEM AT ALL.

THEN THE CHURCH APPROVES KEEPING DIFFERENT GROUPS OF PEOPLE SEPARATE.

OH, NO! NOT AT ALL. WE ALLOW IT IN CERTAIN CASES TO PREVENT GREATER EVIL. BUT THE CHURCH KNOWS THAT ONE DAY ALL SEGREGATION WILL END, AND SHE WILL NEVER APPROVE SEGREGATION AS A POLICY.

**F**OR EXAMPLE, HERE'S SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED IN A PARISH IN THE SOUTHWEST.

FATHER, WE'VE DECIDED TO BAR MEXICANS FROM OUR HOLY NAME SOCIETY. THEY CAN FORM THEIR OWN.

THERE WILL BE NO SUCH BAR IN THIS PARISH! I SUGGEST YOU FORM A STUDY CLUB INSTEAD AND EXAMINE THE CHURCH'S TEACHING ON THE MATTER!

LET'S GO OVER WHAT WE'VE LEARNED SO FAR ABOUT THE INTERRACIAL PROBLEM.

**W**HAT WOULD YOU TELL THE MAN IF HE ASKED WHY HE WAS WRONG? SEE SECTION "I."

**T**HE FOLLOWING WEEK, AT THE CIVICS CLUB MEETING...

**T**HAT EVENING, AFTER THE MEETING YOU'VE FOUND A VERY NICE HOME.

YES, WE LIKE IT, BUT SOME OF OUR NEIGHBORS DON'T LIKE US.

STOP Ruining THIS NEIGHBORHOOD GO WHERE YOU BELONG!

(TO BE CONTINUED)

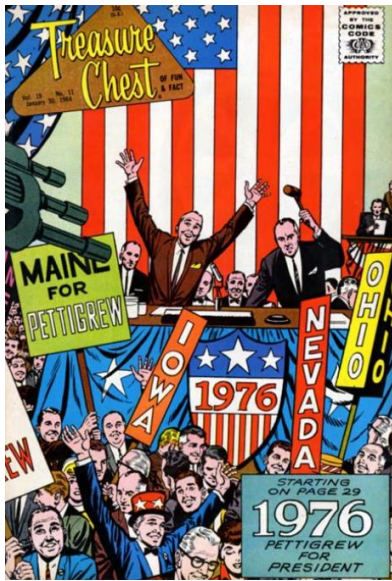
*Summary*

- THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS "RACE" AS MOST PEOPLE UNDERSTAND IT.
- THERE ARE NO SUCH THINGS AS RACES THAT ARE BORN "INFERIOR" OR "SUPERIOR."
- RACE PREJUDICE IS NOT A NATURAL THING. IT USUALLY IS PASSED ON FROM OLDER PEOPLE TO YOUNG ONES.
- PERSONS OF EVERY "RACE" HAVE A RIGHT TO A JOB THAT WILL SUPPORT THEM AND THEIR FAMILIES.
- EMPLOYMENT SHOULD BE GIVEN ON THE BASIS OF ABILITY, NOT ON COLOR OF SKIN OR SHAPE OF EYES.
- RACIAL PREJUDICE COMES MORE FROM IGNORANCE AND MISUNDERSTANDING THAN THE WISH TO DO HARM.
- THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IS TOTALLY OPPOSED TO SEGREGATION AS AN OFFICIAL POLICY.

Figure 13.

Ostendorf, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 6 #6, 1950, p. 13.

Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.



**Figure 14. (Left)**  
Sinnot, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 19 #11, 1964a.  
Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.



**Figure 15. (Right)**  
Sinnot, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 19 #13, 1964b, p. 20.  
Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

Arguably one of the most well-known and remembered *Treasure Chest* story line was the Volume 19 series “Pettigrew for President” that ran in 1964. With *Treasure Chest* at the height of its popularity, this series featured the illustrations of Joe Sinnot, who was a free-lance cartoonist best known for his work on Marvel Comics’ *Fantastic Four* (Catholic University of America). Sinnot teamed up with Berry Reece to write this story in 1964 but set 12 years in the future during the U.S. presidential election of 1976. Beginning in issue 11 shown in Figure 14, readers follow the campaign trail of the fictional Tim Pettigrew from the viewpoint of two children whose father is Pettigrew’s campaign manager. The series is filled with intrigue and action as readers learn that Pettigrew is Catholic but his face is deliberately hidden in each panel. In issue 13 shown in Figure 15, a failed assassination attempt is made on Pettigrew but readers are not made aware of the motivation behind this attempt (Sinnot, 1964b, p. 20). The competition between Pettigrew and his opponent is tense as his opponent seeks to spread lies and negative publicity about him. In the final issue, it is announced at the national convention of his party that he has secured the nomination and is the first black candidate for president of the United States! Ending at the national convention, readers are left wondering if Pettigrew would win the presidential election.

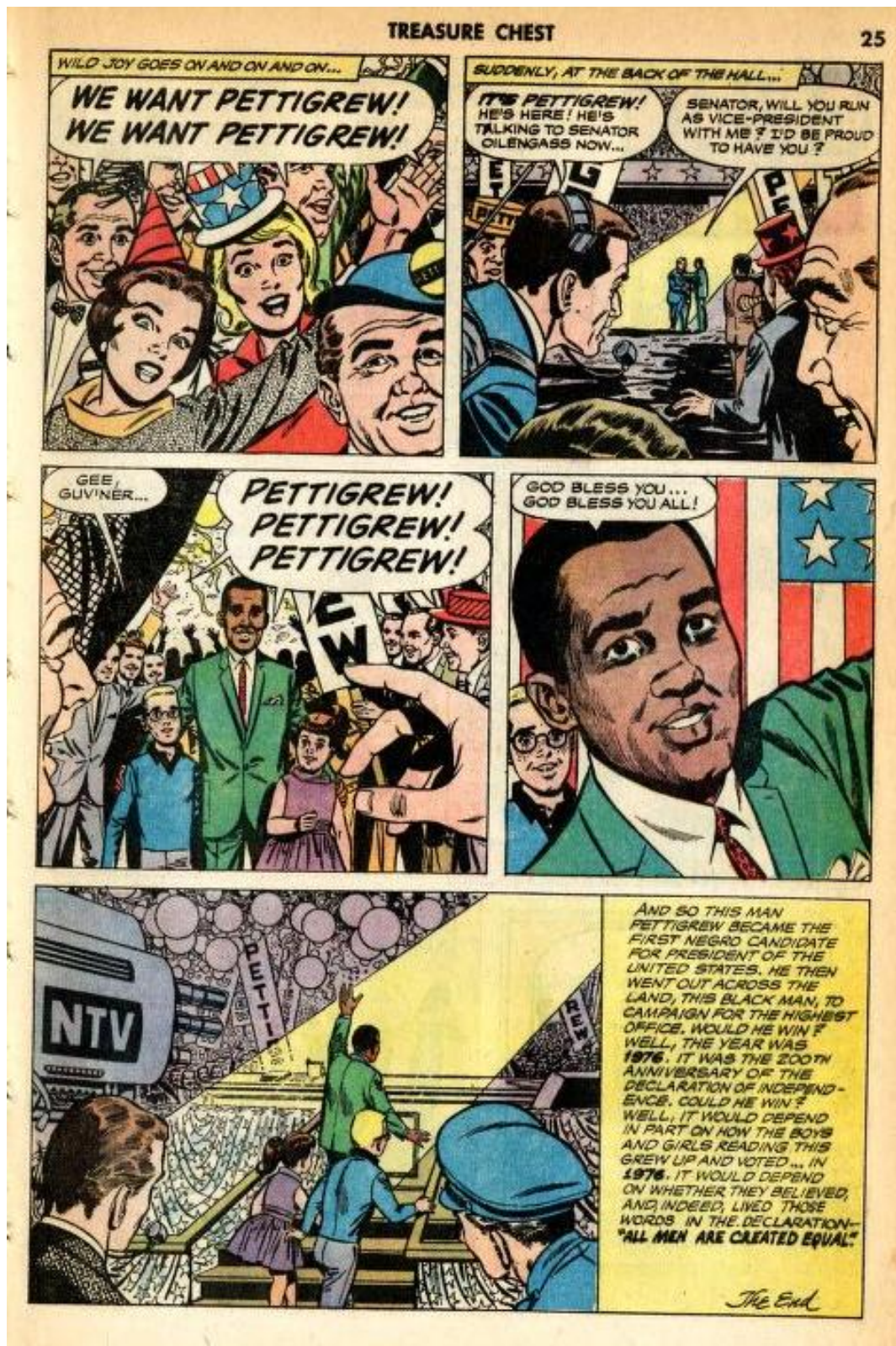


Figure 16.

Sinnot, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 19 #20, 1964c, p. 25.

Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

Published at the peak of the Civil Rights movement, “Pettigrew for President” is arguably *Treasure Chest’s* most revolutionary and progressive story line. Written in 1964, “Pettigrew for President” coincided with the contentious passage of the Civil Rights Act in July that outlawed segregation in schools, public places, and employment.

In an interview, writer Berry Reece explains:

*So, in those racially-divided mid-1960s, I wanted to do this “Pettigrew” series as an outreach to American schoolkids-in a small step to hopefully help better reunite our dis-United States somewhere down the line. I felt that no change-agent could better reunite us than a President. And no President could probably better do that, and get our nation moving towards a real realization of our Constitutional ideals of equal opportunity, than a black president.*

Indeed, Reece tried to convey this message in the last panel of the comic shown in Figure 16 with a call to action for readers:

*“And so this man Pettigrew became the first Negro candidate for president of the United States. He then went out across the land, this black man, to campaign for the highest office. Would he win? Well, the year was **1976**. It was the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Could he win? Well, it would depend on how the boys and girls reading this grew up and voted... In **1976**. It would depend on whether they believed, and, indeed, lived those words in the Declaration-“**All men are created equal.**” (Sinnot, 1964c, p. 25).*

Reece’s vision of a black president in the U.S. would not come to fruition in 1976. Ahead of his time, the election of President Barack Obama as the first black president in 2008 resurrected the memory of the old “Pettigrew for President” story for many former TC readers and was featured in several online forums and articles including the *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR). This salient story is a prime example of how TC’s revolutionary dedication to promoting tolerance and justice had an impact on the minds of the American youth who read it back in 1964.

## American Catholic Citizens: Anti-Communist



**Figure 17.**  
Schaller, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 5 #4, 1949b, p. 34.  
Courtesy of the Catholic University of America  
Digital Collections.

Although TC shows America as tolerant and accepting of diversity, TC shows no tolerance towards communist ideals and takes a strong anti-communist stance. In addition to promoting multiculturalism, the Volume 5 series “It Happens Here: A Story of Young Citizens” in telling the story of displaced persons (DPs) from communist countries also contrasts American democratic ideals with communist ideals. As outlined by Blankenship (2010), the DP Paul’s behavior and mistrust of authority figures reflects the fears of those living in communist countries (p. 66). A key moment in the series is Paul’s realization that unlike in his home country the police are ‘friends’ that need not be feared (Schaller, 1949a, p. 30). Another is his defense of an honest election for the school’s Civics Club president claiming,

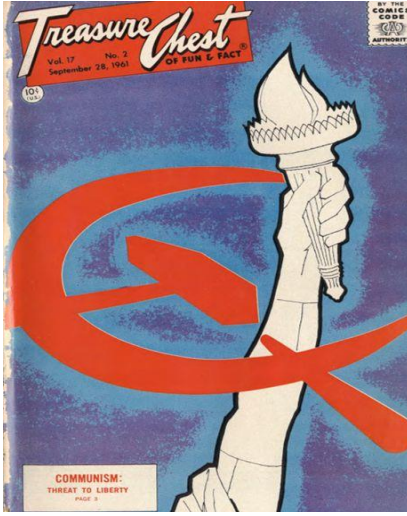
“that only the best person for the job should be elected” as seen in Figure 17 (Schaller, 1949b, p. 34). Figure 17 also shows a priest-teacher affirming Paul’s statements reminding students before voting that, “an honest election is an obligation of good citizenship” (Schaller, 1949b, p. 34).



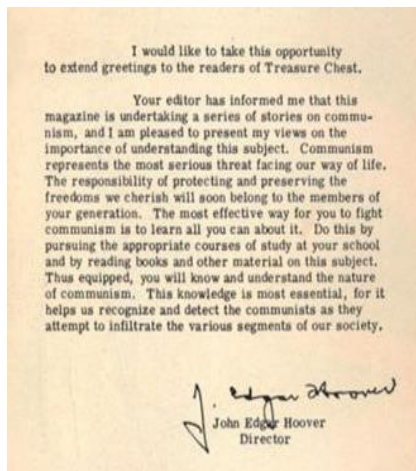
Figure 18.  
Ostendorf, *Treasure Chest*  
Vol. 6 #12, 1949b, p. 4.  
Courtesy of the Catholic  
University of America Digital  
Collections.



Similarly, a “Where Do We Stand?” story (Figure 18) on Catholics as politicians emphasizes that, “no one should vote for [a candidate] simply because [they’re] a Catholic”, which was a fear prevalent among non-Catholics of the time (Ostendorf, 1951b, p. 4). Figure 18 and the rest of the story also shows the Catholic, political candidate having to make moral decisions and goes on to emphasize the importance of citizens voting and having a moral conscience to prevent totalitarianism from undermining democracy. In this way, TC seems to address the Church-State question and echoes the message of the American Catholic bishops regarding the need to combat fascism and communism by preventing moral relativism.



**Figure 19.**  
Crandall, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 17 #2, 1961a. Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.



**Figure 20.**  
Crandall, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 17 #2, 1961a, p. 2. Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

Another iconic story line was the Volume 17 series “This Godless Communism” which explicitly instructed readers about the dangers of communism and how to prevent it. Considering that the Cold War was being waged between the U.S. and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.), “This Godless Communism” was a dystopian story of if the U.S.S.R. won and the U.S. was taken over and made into a communist country called the Union of Soviet States of America (U.S.S.A.). The series showed the U.S.S.A. as having closed churches and people imprisoned for practicing their religion, secret police, government ownership of all private sectors, families broken up with parents forced to work, and censorship with only one official government news source (Crandall, 1961a).

The series opens with a letter shown in Figure 20 from J. Edgar Hoover, who was the first Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (F.B.I.). In the letter, Hoover (1961) claims that “Communism represents the most serious threat facing our way of life” and that the responsibility to protect the freedoms of democracy belongs to all American citizens, including children (p.1). According to Hoover (1961), “The most effective way for you to fight communism is to learn all you can about it” because “it helps us recognize and detect the communists as they attempt to infiltrate the various segments of our society” (p. 1).

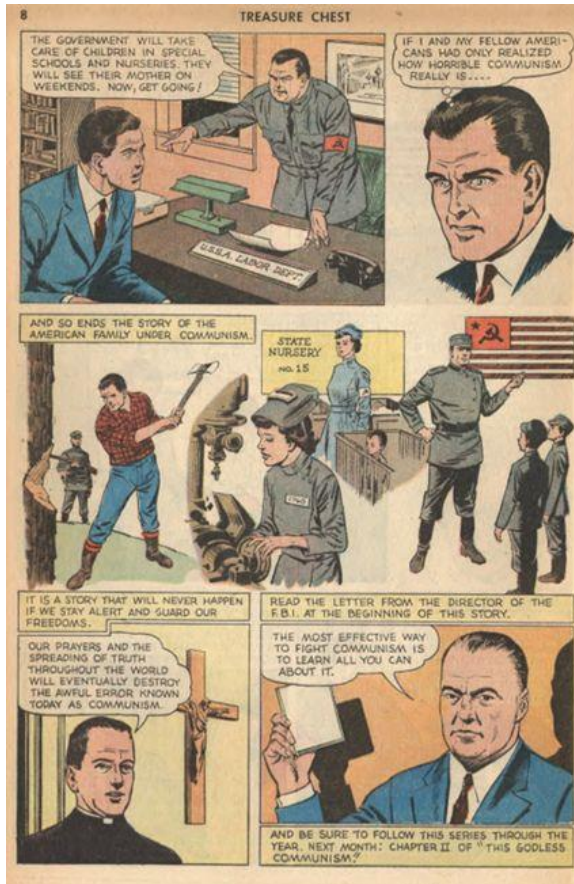


Figure 21.  
Crandall, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 17 #2, 1961a, p. 8.  
Courtesy of the Catholic University of America  
Digital Collections.

The end of the story as seen in Figure 21 shows a man lamenting “If I and my fellow Americans had only realized how horrible communism really is...” (Crandall, 1961a, p. 8). Hope is given, however, with the words that “it is a story that will never happen if we stay alert and guard our freedoms” (Crandall 1961a, p. 8). A priest is shown in Figure 21 telling readers that “our prayers and the spreading of truth” will end communism and Hoover is also shown, echoing the words of his letter, saying that learning more is the best way to fight communism (Crandall, 1961a, p. 8). So readers are charged with the task of protecting their freedoms from communism by strengthening their faith in an effort to find the truth and to prevent hate and moral relativism.

The series “This Godless Communism” also traces the history of communism to the communism of the day, including telling the story of Karl Marx whose writings began communism. A key moment is Marx debating with his friends over Georg Hegel’s philosophy that there is no freedom and no God in Figure 22. A student explains that, “We Catholics know that no ideas are forced on our minds. God has given us a mind with which we make free choices every day” (Crandall, 1961b, p. 31). This seems to be an effort to address anti-Catholic sentiments of the day and the fear of Catholics being “more or less like sheep; they’re going to do exactly what they’re told” (PBS, 2010). In this way, TC seems to emphasize that Catholics are just as free as any other American citizen.



Figure 22.

Crandall, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 17 #4, 1961b, p. 31. Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

Overall, in explicitly teaching about the dangers of communism and taking a hard anti-communist stance TC seems to contrast Catholics and communists in order to emphasize the differences between them to reduce anti-Catholic sentiments of the time. Pflaum Publishing Co. worked to enable TC readers to defend against anti-Catholic sentiments and to defend democracy from the threat of communism.

## American Catholic Citizens: Patriotic

As part of encouraging readers to defend democracy, Pflaum Publishing Co. worked to instill in TC readers a sense of pride in and a sense of duty to their country. In the teacher issues for Volume 20, teachers were informed that the TC issues for the 1964-1965 school year were designed with eight goals in mind, including to “6. create in [students] a sense of history” (Wischmeyer, 1964a, p. 37). To accomplish goal 6, TC included on the last page of each issue a “Pages of History” section that told what happened historically 200, 100, 50, 10, 1, etc. years ago in both American and Catholic history (Wischmeyer, 1964a, p. 35).



Teachers in Catholic schools and editors of Catholic educational magazines have a common goal: the intellectual and spiritual development of children. One of the chief means of achieving this goal is the printed word. Only a little less important is illustration. Teachers know that when the printed word and illustration are combined effectively, the impact is much stronger than when one or the other is used independently. This is where the Catholic comic book, TREASURE CHEST, comes in.

Combining good art and concise writing, TREASURE CHEST is a comic book with a purpose — and a well-balanced program. Its purpose is to help develop the minds of Catholic children. It fulfills this purpose through a program of factual material (science, religion, history, geography, social science), wholesome fiction, and humor.

## TREASURE CHEST'S 1964 1965 PROGRAM

How will TREASURE CHEST achieve a balanced presentation of material for its youthful readers this year? Through an eight-point program that will:

1. interest your pupils in the Old Testament (religion)
2. acquaint them with Canada's provinces and territories (history and geography)
3. inspire them toward lives of service to their country and their fellow man (civics)
4. show them new scientific advances and basic astronomy (science)
5. teach them the fundamentals of "minor" sports (physical fitness)
6. create in them a sense of history
7. entertain them with fiction and humor
8. reach their parents through a column for parents.

Figure 23.  
Wischnmeyer, *Treasure Chest*  
Vol. 20 #1, 1964a, p. 37.  
Courtesy of the Catholic University  
of America Digital Collections.

Since the beginning, TC has also included stories about historical events and historical figures. The Volume 1 series “The Ark and the Dove: Founding of Maryland” tells of how Maryland came to be established as a colony for Catholics (Pflaum, 1946a, p. 13-16). The focus on how Catholics faced discrimination in the colonies and the development of the Toleration Act, which granted freedom to practice all religions in Maryland, also reminds readers that people came to America for religious freedom, which would later become one of the Four Freedoms identified by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Pflaum, 1946a, p. 13-16; Pflaum 1946b, p. 12-15). Blankenship (2010) claimed that TC “regularly defined America by freedom”, and I argue that religious freedom was considered by TC as the most important (p. 64). The story of Maryland and others like it remind Catholics of their place in American history and how key religious freedom was to American democracy. Considering anti-Catholic sentiments of the time, TC suggests that there is not something un-American about Catholicism like Paul Blanshard charged in his critique of NODL and that there should not be discrimination because America was founded on principles of religious freedom.

Another goal for the 1964-65 school year was to “3. inspire [students] toward lives of service to their country and their fellow man” (Wischmeyer, 1964a, p. 37). To accomplish this, TC ran a series of stories on the lives of 10 ‘great’ American Catholic lay people: Margaret Haughery, Dr. Thomas Dooley, Thomas Dongan, John F. Kennedy, Margaret Brent, Charles Carroll, Admiral John Barry, Pierre Toussaint, Philip Sheridan, and Babe Ruth (Wischmeyer, 1964a, p. 39-40). During the late 1600s, Thomas Dongan served as the first Catholic governor of New York while overcoming anti-Catholic sentiments and even drafted a “Charter of Liberties” as seen in Figure 24 that prevented religious persecution, which would later be a basis for the U.S. Constitution (Klosterman, 1965a). Despite Catholics being unallowed to participate in politics, “Colonial Patriot” tells of how Charles Carroll would not be silenced as he wrote in support of the Patriots and later went on to sign the Declaration of Independence (Klosterman, 1965c). The purpose of including these stories and others like it seems to be to remind readers that Catholics have overcome discrimination and shaped American history, especially in promoting religious freedom. Admiral John Barry’s story tells of his patriotism and service to his country as part of the Navy during the Revolutionary war and commends

his efforts to establish a peace-time navy making him the “Father of the American Navy” (Klosterman, 1964b, p. 8). In “‘Little Phil’ Sheridan: Hero of the Civil War”, TC describes how Philip Sheridan bravely led Union troops into battle and was later commended by the Cardinal Gibbons as a “hero who helped seal the unity of our country” (Klosterman, 1965b, p. 31). Although their Catholic identity was not stressed, these stories show how Catholic, American citizens have throughout American history served their country and been defenders of democracy and the freedoms of democracy. These stories were key in conveying to readers that one could be both Catholic and patriotic.



Figure 24.

Klosterman, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 20 #12, 1965a, p. 4. Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

Colonists celebrating Governor Dongan’s acts and his creation of a “charter of Liberties.”



Figure 25.

Klosterman, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 20 #20, 1965c, p. 27. Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

Charles Carroll the ‘Catholic Patriot’ as the last living signer of the *Declaration of Independence*.



Figure 26.

Klosterman, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 20 #4, 1964a, p. 26. Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

Tom Dooley served as a doctor in Laos.

The inclusion of stories on more modern lay Catholics showed readers how they could serve both their country and their neighbor in their time. In “Tom Dooley, Valiant American Doctor,” TC tells of how Tom Dooley served in the US Navy helping refugees flee from communist North Vietnam and later returned to Laos as a doctor to selflessly serve the sick, despite suffering from cancer (Klosterman, 1964a).



Similarly, a Volume 22 story told of how American Dr. Patricia Marie Smith serves the people of Vietnam as seen in Figure 27 (Grady, 1967). A panel of Figure 30 shows an American soldier saying “Dr. Pat and her staff are winning the hearts and minds of the people! That can only help us do our job of protecting freedom!” (Grady, 1967, p. 34). Stories like this convey that there are many ways to combine service to one’s country and neighbor beyond serving in the military or politics.



Figure 27.

Grady, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 22 #20, 1967, p. 34. Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

Dr. Pat Smith served and has been commended for her work as a doctor to the people and American soldiers in Vietnam.

TC emphasized this further in the career advice given by Monsignor James Conroy, editor of the “Our Sunday Visitor”<sup>9</sup> youth section (Wischmeyer, 1964a, p. 40). The series was formatted as “Msgr. Conroy Asks - Would You Like to Be a [insert occupation here]?”, with Conroy proceeding to describe how one could serve their country, neighbor, and even God through this occupation. For example, “Msgr. Conroy Asks- Would You Like to Be a Doctor?” outlines how doctors continue God’s work in their care for others and reverence for the human body (Conroy, 1964b, p. 28). On lawyers, Conroy (1964a) writes that “A lawyer really does the work of God on earth by helping carry out the laws of his state and country. These are only extensions of God’s laws for us” (p. 16). Conroy (1964c) argues that journalists have a serious duty because “[They] are the inspiration of uncounted multitudes who are looking for the Truth all over the world. You can be Communism’s most formidable opponent” (p. 21). The advice given in this series on various occupations conveys that one’s identity and duties as a Catholic and an American citizen can overlap and connect. In this way, TC emphasized that children could be good Catholic American citizens.

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<sup>9</sup> The “Our Sunday Visitor” was started by Bishop Noll for the purpose of publishing a weekly newspaper and has become the “largest English Catholic publisher in the world” (Our Sunday Visitor Inc., 2018).

## American Catholic Citizens: Moral

After answering “What is America?”, Blankenship (2010) claims that TC then seeks to answer “How do we keep America this way?” (p. 65, 69). In addition to outlining the need to defend democracy from communism, TC also encouraged readers to be good Catholic, American citizens by developing good morals and serving others in their community.



Figure 28.  
Schaller, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 5 #16, 1950, p. 27.  
Courtesy of the Catholic University of America  
Digital Collections.

(Schaller, 1950, p. 26). Finding this answer lacking, the students ask the editor of the newspaper, who answers that a good citizen “pays his bills, sweeps the snow from his sidewalk, and joins clubs that help the community” (Schaller, 1950, p. 26). While they found merit in both answers, the students believing something to be missing. Consulting their priest, he tells them that the missing link is so simple that they have overlooked it: love or also known as charity (Schaller, 1950, p. 27). Pointing to a painting of the story of the Good Samaritan, the priest shown in Figure 28 goes on to define citizenship in terms of loving one’s neighbor as shown “not by words alone, but by deeds” (Schaller, 1950, p. 27).

Blankenship (2010) offers as an example an “It Happens Here” story on students in a civics club searching for an answer to the question of “Who is a good citizen?” (Blankenship, 2010, p. 69; Schaller, 1950, p. 25). The DP Paul’s answers reflect his experience under a communist regime in his explanation that good citizenship is “doing whatever the government says to do, without question” (Schaller, 1950, p. 25). In an interview with the mayor, the students are told that “A good citizen is someone who obeys the laws, pays taxes, and votes at all elections”



Figure 29.

Schaller, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 5 #16, 1950, p. 28. Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

As seen in Figure 29, the priest emphasizes that one's neighbor is all people and so good citizenship involves showing "justice to everyone; charity to all who need it" (Schaller, 1950, p. 28). The imagery of the Good Samaritan reaffirms this message and reminds readers of the importance of showing mercy and kindness to all, which Blankenship (2010) identifies as the essence of all the other actions described as good citizenship (p. 70). Before telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus also gives what it known as 'The Greatest Commandment':

*You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.*  
(Luke 10:27, New American Bible Revised Edition)

This is reflected in the priest's end message at the bottom of Figure 29 that "first and last, a good citizen obeys the laws of God. He loves God and loves his neighbor" (Schaller, 1950, p. 28). Blankenship (2010) also emphasizes the importance of not only the answers given but also who the students seek as an authority on the subject (p. 70). While the politician and the journalist would seem like authorities on the community and citizenship, the priest is shown as having the key answer thereby also affirming the supremacy and authority of the Catholic Church (Blankenship, 2010, p. 70). Blankenship (2010) argues that this suggests that Catholics "hold the key to a more perfect America" (p. 70). In this way, TC portrays the focus on charity and common good found in Catholic Social Teachings as what qualifies Catholics as good American citizens.

Considering the fear of communism and Catholic youth falling away from the faith, TC also sought to instill good morals in readers and serve as an alternative to the comics considered ‘objectionable’ by NODL. TC stories often contained moral teachings and characters that served as models of good moral behavior. Although TC stories did not always show characters acting with perfect moral behavior, this made the characters more relatable to the readers who hopefully could also learn from the mistakes the characters made.

The series “Chuck White” that ran through all the issues of TC showed the protagonist, Chuck White, facing common moral dilemmas that readers of the time may experience and could relate to. For example, the second volume follows Chuck White as he gets arrested for robbery and ‘cleans up his act’, including joining the school’s football team. After losing his temper and starting a fight on the field during a football game, Father Carroll, the school priest and football coach, tells Chuck White a lesson on how “humility is a virtue” as seen in Figure 30 (Pflaum, 1946e, p. 22). His personal journey from a delinquent youth who struggled with his faith to a virtuous Catholic man was very practical and a favorite staple of TC. Fordham University Libraries Director Linda Sochiavo recalled how TC “attempted to deal with issues like juvenile delinquency and social unrest at a time when these topics weren’t easily discussed in Catholic grammar school” (qtd. in Sassi, 2017). In “Local Memories” (2003), Elizabeth McKeown describes her memories of reading TC:

*So, after the movies, we would go home to the Treasure Chest, looking for local heroes. There were always loads of martyrs available fore the role... But I preferred a less strenuous sort of romantic lead and I was especially fond of Chuck White, Treasure Chest’s leading layperson. Chuck earned a sweater letter, straight A’s, and the admiration of all his peers. He wore saddle shoes like Archie, but he had a kind of gravity-entirely appropriate for a Catholic youth Leader-that Archie and his gang lacked. Chuck was honorable and affable and good looking, and I wanted to marry him and to be in the movies. (p. 22)*

McKeown is not the only one who thinks of Chuck White when they think of TC as his name is often found in Forum posts referencing the comic series. Chuck White was such a success that his story was featured in each issue of TC over its 27 volumes.



Figure 30.

Pflaum, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 2 #8, 1946e, p. 22.

Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.



**Figure 31.**  
Pflaum, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 1 #3, 1950, p. 3.  
Courtesy of the Catholic University of  
America Digital Collections.

In contrast to the popular superheroes of ‘objectionable’ comics, TC offered the saints and biblical figures as role models for their readers. This is established in the first volume in the telling of the story of “Joseph Anchieta S.J.: Apostle of Brazil”. Rather than look up to figures like Christopher Columbus, his mother points at a cross and tells him that “if you want to be a hero, Joseph, take the greatest hero as your model” (Pflaum, 1946b, p. 3). This was a very key message for readers that as Catholics they should hold paramount Jesus as a role model and look to other saints who strove to serve and follow Jesus as examples of how to live.



Figure 32. (Above)  
Ostendorf, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 10 #10, 1955, p. 3. Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.

Figure 33. (Right)  
Ostendorf, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 10 #10, 1955, p. 8. Courtesy of the Catholic University of America Digital Collections.



For example, Figure 32 shows a girl telling a religious sister that “I’d like to offer my prayers to some special saint who will help me to be the kind of person my parents and God want me to be” (Ostendorf, 1955, p. 3). The sister suggests St. Agnes then proceeds to tell St. Agnes’ life story, ending in Figure 33 with how “naturally she has become the patron saint of young girls. What better model could you follow if you want to be pure and good?” (Ostendorf, 1955, p. 8).



Another goal outlined in the teacher issue for the 1964-65 school year was to “1. interest [students] in the Old Testament” through a series of stories called “Heroes of the Old Testament” (Wischmeyer, 1964a, p. 37). In the first story on Abraham, TC prefaces the series claiming that “many events in the Old Testament are as exciting as a modern adventure story” (Ostendorf, 1964, p. 3).

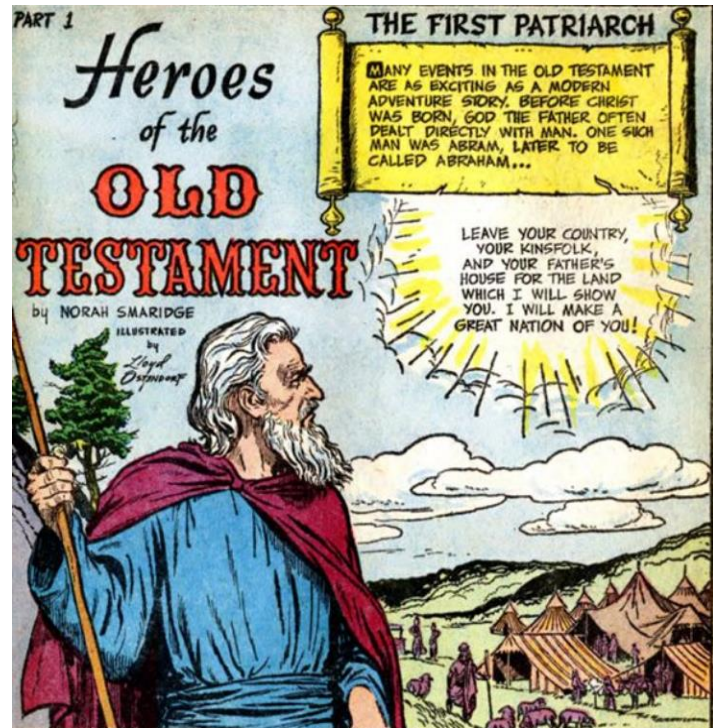


Figure 34.

Wischmeyer, *Treasure Chest* Vol. 20 #1, 1964a, p. 37.

Courtesy of the Catholic University of America

Digital Collections.

In a note to parents on the story of Daniel, TC notes that these stories are not necessarily historical fact but that

*The author of the Book of Daniel used these stories to encourage the Jews of the second century B.C. to be brave in the face of persecution. Daniel and his three companions triumphed over difficulties with the help of God. The persecuted second-century Jew could easily apply these stories to himself.*

(Wischmeyer, 1965, p. 35).

The inclusion of this note reflects that TC was aware of anti-Catholic sentiments of this time and that they included the story with the purpose of encouraging readers who may be facing discrimination to lean into their faith. The goal was for readers, like the persecuted second-century Jews, to be able to apply these stories to their own lives and use them as inspiration. So by including many stories of saints and using terms like ‘heroes’ and ‘adventure’ to describe them, TC suggests that saints and biblical figures should be looked to as role models for their readers rather than superheroes and that these stories can be just as interesting.

## Conclusion: Finding Treasure

Since the rise of comic books in the late 1930s, American Catholics have had significant influence on the comic book industry through censorship as well as its sponsorship of the medium. Early Catholic comics like *(Timeless) Topix*, *Picture Stories from the Bible*, and *Treasure Chest* used the comic medium to present the saints and biblical figures as role models and present their stories in a way to show that they can be just as interesting as the ‘objectionable’ superhero or crime comics of the day. While similar to its predecessors, *Treasure Chest* stands out for its sheer volume of issues, its greater variety of topics, and its mission to educate American youth on the Catholic faith and civics.

Beyond its long run, *Treasure Chest* seems to have been a successful historical example of how comics have been used to catechize as evident in the positive responses. This is seen in the fond memories many former readers have expressed on online forums as well as contemporary letters written by readers to the editor of *Treasure Chest*, which were printed with responses in the “Backtalk” section that began appearing in Volume 22. A reader named Valerie Groncki wrote in, “Dear Editor: I am a great fan of TC. I hope your fabulous magazine will carry on its entertainment for children for many more years!” (Langdon, 1967a, p. 34). Short letters expressing appreciation for *Treasure Chest* and or telling jokes continued to appear at the end of each issue for the remainder of *Treasure Chest’s* run. These positive responses speak to how comic books have been used in the past as a useful teaching tool for religion because the interest in the genre can motivate them to engage with the material and the medium can help connect the material with the students.

The Church still uses visuals like comics and coloring books to teach children today. According to Blankenship (2010), “Just as *Treasure Chest* approached questions of citizenship decades ago, American Catholics today address concerns through the medium thought most likely to appeal to children” (p. 75). Just as *Treasure Chest* addressed current issues like racism, the New York Archdiocese in 2007 used comic books and coloring books to address and educate American youth on serious issues like

priest abuse scandals (Blankenship, 2010, p. 64). Comic books have also been used to educate on the lives of various saints and American Catholics. For example, the comic book *Fr. Augustus Tolton: The First Recognized Black Catholic Priest in America* (2015) endorsed by Auxiliary Bishop Joseph N. Perry of Chicago was made to educate and raise awareness to help advance Fr. August Tolton's cause for sainthood. Blankenship (2010) compares the purpose and function of *Treasure Chest* comics to 'textbooks' but highlights that the comic medium allowed for greater flexibility as they were able to make connections to current events and concerns (like communism) that was enticing and relevant to youth of the day. In addition, it allowed for more relatable characters as role models like Chuck White who was an American youth growing just like them.

Scholars like Blankenship (2010) and Jacobs (2013) contend that comic books seem to be a natural medium for the Catholic Church. Jacobs (2013) focused on how comics can promote development of multimodal literacy, which refers to how language can be presented in a way that combines two or more modes of meaning making. As outlined by Darby Orcutt (2010), "religious experience is similarly multimodal" with "religious traditions include[ing] beliefs, rituals, texts, morals, and more, expressed by means of speaking, writing, performance, prayer, meditation, music, art, and so on" (p. 94). In a religion classroom, the development of multimodal literacy with comic books is a great way to illustrate the complex relationship between the means of religious expression. By showing the character's inner thoughts and outward actions, Anglican teacher Rae Hancock (2015) claims that comics are important in religious education because they help to show the relationship between belief and practice (p. 31). The ability to think symbolically and make connections is also important as the Catholic tradition is also rich with the use of icons, or visual symbols, such as the cross and the ichthys<sup>10</sup> or fish. Thinking symbolically and making connections is seen in comics use of icons, colors, perspective, and the cartoon vocabulary (e.g. dashes to indicate rain and a cloud with dots from a head to indicate that character's thoughts). Beyond icons, the use of art and visuals to teach the Catholic faith is deeply rooted in Catholic tradition and history.

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<sup>10</sup> Ichthys is the Greek word for fish and forms an acrostic with the first letters from the phrase "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior" (Hassett, 1909). In this way, the fish has come to symbolize Jesus for Catholics.

During the Medieval Ages, many European Catholics were illiterate and so religious art was used as a visual aid to help catechize them. For example, stained glass windows were used by priests to illustrate and reflect on the faith topics covered in the day's mass readings and homilies (Jones, 2008, p. 19; Orcutt, 2010, p. 96). In this way, the tradition and history of using visuals to teach the Catholic faith seems to validate the use of comic books and graphic novels as a catechetical tool.

Since the decline of *Treasure Chest* in the early 1970s, American Catholic sponsorship of the comic medium for catechesis has also declined as sponsorship among Protestants and Christian evangelicals has risen. Several works could be characterized as modernized versions of *Picture Stories from the Bible* or *Topix* with longer and more refined illustrated adaptations of religious narratives. For example, *The Action Bible* (2010) by David Cook presents biblical narratives in a way that emphasizes the action and heroes of the stories. The illustrations of this graphic novel adaptation of the Bible are very vivid and reflects the style of superhero comics, which is fitting since the illustrator Sergio Cariello has worked for big names like Marvel and DC Comics. In the introduction, the general editor Doug Mauss explains that "God is the original action hero. Everyone is so impressed when Superman blows a car over with his breath, yet God created the whole universe with his breath. Superman may save the day with his strength, but Jesus saved the whole world with his death" (Cook, 2010, p. 7). He issues a challenge to readers to think about how they are called to "be God's next generation of difference-makers" and asks "How will you answer God's call to action?" (Cook, 2010, p. 7). Similarly, *The Ultimate Bible Character Guide* (2019) by Gina Detwiler presents an anthology of biblical characters as if they were trading cards listing their traits, strengths, and weaknesses. In the introduction, Detwiler (2019) explains that the purpose of this book is to help illustrate that the Bible is not boring and to help readers "see the people of the Bible as humans like yourself. These are not Marvel heroes and villains; instead they are men, women, and even children who struggled with temptation, fear, and loneliness, who failed often, who lost faith, and who learned many lessons the hard way" (p. 5). She ends with a challenge to readers to "Find your ultimate characters. Let their stories-their faith and their moments of victory-strengthen you. Let them inspire you to base your life on the Bible with an ultimate goal of living for God and letting Him shape your own

amazing story” (Detwiler, 2019, p. 5). Both of these examples like *Treasure Chest* and the early Catholic comics used terms like ‘heroes,’ ‘action,’ and ‘adventure’ to present the biblical figures as role models for their readers and motivate readers to engage with the Bible.

In addition to a need for more Catholic comics, there is also a need to move beyond comics that are adaptations of religious and biblical narratives. For example, Sophia Institute Press offers graphic novels that are collections of stories of saints entitled *The Saints Chronicles*. However, there is a need for comics with religious elements or themes that are not telling stories from religion. *Treasure Chest* showed the power in using more modern layperson characters like Chuck White in making the content more relevant and applicable to its readers. Br. Amadeus’ *The Truth Is Out There* (2013) with Erc and Brendan who unapologetically discuss their struggles with faith and religion seem to be closest to what *Treasure Chest* did decades prior. Br. Amadeus seamlessly incorporates elements of the philosophies of Thomas Aquinas and C.S. Lewis in ways that are more accessible for youth of today. According to Rachel Maire Crane-Williams (2008), comics can be used to discuss difficult and complex topics because they have the potential to generate a sense of empathy and human connectedness among students by helping them to visualize the characters and the conflicts they undergo (p. 15). This is seen in how secular comics *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi discuss complex topics such as war, peace, human rights, and religion. While Br. Amadeus has written several follow-up graphic novels, there is still a need for more Catholic comics like it that incorporate and address difficult and complex Catholic teachings and issues. Despite the limited options, comics still have the potential to be used today as an innovative way to address complex topics or concerns, to motivate American youth to engage with the material, and to help American youth to connect the material with their lives and world today.

Today, Pflaum Publishing Co.’s *Treasure Chest* comic series seems to be buried in history and treasured in memory. *Dayton Daily News* articles in 2012 and 2013 discuss the Pflaum legacy including a sculpture commissioned by Bill Pflaum, the son of Pflaum Jr., to commemorate his family’s contributions to Dayton. Called “Fluid Dynamics,” the sculpture is part of the Canal Parkway Project and according to Bill stands for how “it is

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possible to recapture (Dayton's) spirit of innovation. My guidance to the artists was to create a piece that spoke not only to the past but more importantly looked to the future" (qtd. in Page, 2012). As historical examples, the Pflaum publications can speak to the past and also inform catechetical efforts today and in the future. Keeping in mind the emphasis on citizenship, the Pflaum publications remind catechists of the importance of educating the whole person and the importance of preparing children to be citizens and Christian disciples in American society. *Treasure Chest* was innovative for its time in using entertainment and real-life events to teach the Catholic faith and morals that were relatable and applicable to students lives. This innovation is something that the Catholic Church and catechists in the U.S. should continue to strive for in order to usher in a new generation of Catholics who are strong in their faith.

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