The Contours of Conversion to Catholicism in the Nineteenth Century

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The chronological and theological contours of conversion to Catholicism in the nineteenth-century United States evidence three waves. Beginning with John Thayer's 1783 conversion from Congregationalism and continuing through the 1830s, conversions were scattered, and often from Reformed Protestantism. The 1840s through 1860s, the critical period for Catholic conversion, included converts from American Episcopalianism, riven by the Oxford movement, and from Transcendentalist and liberal Christian reformers dissatisfied with reform's theological underpinnings. These converts became the agents of a new movement to convert Protestants. From 1870 through the early twentieth century, missionary priests, especially members of the Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle (Paulists), won thousands of converts, making conversion to Catholicism a viable choice for many more Americans.

t the nineteenth century's end, U.S. Catholics counted the converts they had gained. D. J. Scannell-O'Neill, the most prolific convert list-maker, whose series of articles eventually culminated in the book-length, *Distinguished Converts to Rome in America* (1907), listed 3,000 names. The list, while not exhaustive, emphasized converts' dignity more than their quantity: 8 converts who became bishops or archbishops (actually, there were 11); 202 who became priests; 115 medical doctors; 126 lawyers; 45 members of Congress; 372 ex-Protestant clergymen and 3 ex-rabbis; and the wives of the above, plus 260 who became women religious. Richard H. Clarke had earlier published a list of about 700 converts

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dating back to the priest John Thayer (1755–1815). The Paulist missionary Alfred Young (1831–1900) compiled a similar list, appending it to his book, *Catholic and Protestant Countries Compared*. Though these compilers' zeal sometimes exceeded fact, these lists illustrated the public story of how Catholics had made thousands of converts, including American society's elites.¹

Another kind of list witnessed to a larger but more subtle story. From 1852 to 1907, the Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle (the Paulists) maintained careful records of the converts they had won through their ministry to Protestants. In six large manuscript volumes, Paulist Fathers—most of whom were converts themselves—chronicled how they had multiplied their efforts across time and space to persuade Protestants to embrace Catholicism. In the mid-1800s, the Paulists numbered four priests based in a midtown-Manhattan parish; sixty-five years later, they had mission bands throughout the country. They counted hundreds of converts each year, nearly 6,000 over the course of the half century. The Paulists recorded converts from every class—from the wealthy to the poor, the learned and the uneducated. Unlike the list-compilers, who gathered their data from letters and their connections within the church, the Paulists counted only those who they had personally baptized or received into the Catholic Church.²

Estimating the number of converts from these varied sources is not possible. As E. Rameur, a nineteenth-century French observer of Catholicism, stated, "estimates are very variable" because the U.S. government did not record religious affiliation in its censuses. Scholars have most frequently cited an estimated 700,000 conversions from 1813 to 1893. That number is certainly wrong. Based on his list of 700 converts, Clarke guessed that converts and their descendants must have numbered 700,000, and several

^{1.} D. J. Scannell-O'Neill, Distinguished Converts to Rome in America (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1907); Richard H. Clarke, "Our Converts [Part II]," American Catholic Quarterly Review 19, no. 73 (1894): 112–138; Alfred Young, Catholic and Protestant Countries Compared in Civilization, Popular Happiness, General Intelligence, and Morality (New York: Catholic Book Exchange, 1895), 592–611, among many other such lists. After fact checking, a compilation of these converts will appear in Erin Bartram and Lincoln Mullen, The American Converts Database, http://americanconverts.org.

^{2.} Chronicle of the Missions Given by the Congregation of Missionary Priests of St. Paul the Apostle, six manuscript volumes (hereafter, Paulist Mission Chronicles), Office of Paulist History and Archives, North American Paulist Center, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, PHA). For the converts mentioned, see 1:25–26. For summary statistics of the Paulist missions, see 1:163–66; 2: flyleaf; 5:318–20, Paulist Mission Chronicles. Jay Dolan, Catholic Revivalism: The American Experience, 1830–1900 (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978) offers the fullest treatment of Catholic missions.

^{3.} E. Rameur, "The Progress of the Church in the United States," Catholic World 1, no. 1 (1865): 4.

scholars compounded that unfounded guess by assuming the number meant only converts.⁴

Without knowing their number, it is possible, however, to note converts' importance. Rameur concluded that "the influence of immigration is not enough to account for the rapid progress of the faith." The sufficiently large number of converts meant that church officials could speak of the "convert element." When bishops confirmed, often a handful or more of adult converts were among the scores of children. Within parish registers of predominately infant baptisms, the conversions of adults may also be found.

Converts rose to prominence among U.S. Catholics: Orestes Brownson (1803–1876), noted apologist and intellectual; Isaac Hecker (1819–1888), founder of the Paulists and leader of the church's missionary movement; and James Roosevelt Bayley (1814–1877), head of the U.S. hierarchy as archbishop of Baltimore. Patrick Allitt has argued that converts were the primary intellectual drivers of the Catholic Church on both sides of the Atlantic, contributing much to the life of the Catholic Church in the nineteenth-century United States.⁷

This article traces the chronological and theological contours of nine-teenth-century U.S. conversion to Catholicism. The converts can be assigned to one of three waves. The first wave began with John Thayer's 1783 conversion from Congregationalism and continued through the 1830s with scattered conversions, often from Reformed Protestant groups. During

^{4.} Clarke, "Our Converts [Part 1]," 541–542, makes the unfounded guess about the "convert element," compounding it with an error in arithmetic. George K. Malone, *The True Church: A Study in the Apologetics of Orestes Brownson* (Mundelein, IL: Saint Mary of the Lake Seminary, 1957), 2, correctly cites the Clarke's estimate as converts and their descendants. But Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 548, mistakenly cites the 700,000 number from Malone as referring to converts alone. Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), xx, repeats the error, citing Ahlstrom and (without page number) Edwin S. Gaustad's *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976). Edwin Scott Gaustad and Philip L. Barlow, with Richard W. Dishno, *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 155–162, 309–320, offer no estimate of Catholic conversions.

^{5.} Rameur, "Progress of the Church," 13.

^{6.} New-York Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register, July 6, 1844, p. 4; July 20, 1844, p. 21; October 26, 1844. For example, D. C. Johnston and a Mr. Briggs were confirmed at the same time as Orestes Brownson, along with most of Brownson's large family. Jack Larkin, "What He Did For Love: David Claypoole Johnston and the Boston Irish, 1825–1865," Common-place 13, no. 3 (Spring 2013): http://www.common-place.org/vol-13/no-03/larkin/.

^{7.} Patrick Allitt, Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

the 1840s through 1860s, the critical period for Catholic conversion, converts inspired by the Oxford movement entered the church from American Episcopalianism, and Transcendentalists and liberal Christian reformers dissatisfied with the theological underpinnings of reform embraced Catholicism. These converts became the agents behind a new movement to convert Protestants. During this third wave, from 1870 through the twentieth century's beginnings, missionary priests won thousands of converts. Though converts embraced Catholicism for various reasons, they showed a great deal of unity in offering a justification for conversion: in theological terms, a yearning for "catholicity." Many American Protestants, troubled by the divisions and heresies in the American free market of religion, sought out a catholicity marked by unity in a visible, orthodox church.

Theological Contours

Nineteenth-century converts to Catholicism in the U.S. frequently joined the church as they turned away from the variety of Protestant denominations. As historians have observed, the number of religious groups multiplied at an astonishing clip after the American Revolution. Religious choice must have appealed to many Americans since they joined churches in ever-increasing numbers, but tens of thousands became convinced that if so many religious groups could claim truth, none actually possessed it. Stephen C. Blyth, a Bostonian who heard Father Thayer preach, tried the Episcopal, Moravian, Universalist, and Swedenborgian churches, spoke with Thomas Paine in France about infidelity, and even sent a letter to a Turkish ambassador to Britain inquiring about Islam. Finally, he converted to Catholicism in Boston, stating, "In this chaos of creeds—amid this anarchy of sects and opinions, it is true with mathematical certainty that all cannot have truth on their side."

The most famous Catholic convert of the age, Orestes Brownson, experimented with as many religions as one could: Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, Universalism, Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, and finally Catholicism. When he became convinced that salvation came only through the church, he wrote that "we take it for granted that no serious Protestant can be satisfied with the present state of our Protestant world. The foundation of all moral and social well-being is in religion; and religion cannot coexist ... with our sectarian divisions, dissensions, and animosities." Brownson concluded that "the great evil under which we suffer is not so much *wrong*-churchism, as it is *no*-churchism," his term for the inevitable consequence of

^{8.} Stephen Cleveland Blyth, An Apology for the Conversion of Stephen Cleveland Blyth, to the Faith of the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church (Montreal: Nahum Mower, 1815), 48–49.

Protestant fragmentation. He became convinced that one must "either accept No-churchism and say no more about it," or "if we must have a Church, and cannot have one without returning to the Roman communion, then, let us go to Rome." While religion in the U.S. became a voluntary system in which one chose a denomination, some opted out of the system altogether by converting to a religion claiming "catholicity."

"Catholicity" could be widely applied to Christianity's universalism, but also served as a common name for the Catholic Church, a shorthand reference to the church by its most persuasive character. Thus the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier Weninger (1805–1888) appealed to Protestants in his book Catholicity, Protestantism and Infidelity, and the former Episcopalian Fanny Maria Pittar described herself as A Protestant Converted to Catholicity by Her Bible and Prayer-Book. In a series of lectures titled Evidences of Catholicity, Archbishop Martin John Spalding (1810–1872) of Baltimore used the recently developed mode of evidentiary, rationalist apologetics to define an ancient idea about the church. He argued that four creedal descriptions of the true church—"one, holy, catholic, apostolic"—along with miracles, papal infallibility, and the primacy of the see of St. Peter, comprised the definite marks of "catholicity," and only the Catholic Church possessed those marks. Catholicity professed that the true church was unified in doctrine and practice through space and time. In

The Catholic Church's catholicity included institutional and theological dimensions. By the middle of the century, U.S. Catholics were the largest minority faith. ¹² Considered together, Protestants were far and away a majority, but Catholics argued Protestantism could not be considered united but as fragmented into mutually incompatible groups. Catholics pointed out that even the pan-Protestantism of the American Bible Society and American

^{9.} Orestes A. Brownson, "Sparks on Episcopacy," Brownson's Quarterly Review 1 (July 1844): 386–396; "Nature and Office of the Church," Brownson's Quarterly Review 1 (April 1855): 247; "Bishop Hopkins on Novelties," Brownson's Quarterly Review 1 (July 1844): 366; Orestes Augustus Brownson, The Convert; or, Leaves from My Experience (New York: E. Dunigan and Brother, 1857); Patrick Carey, Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004).

^{10.} Francis Xavier Weninger, Catholicity, Protestantism and Infidelity: An Appeal to Candid Americans (New York: Sadlier & Co., 1869); Fanny Maria Pittar, A Protestant Converted to Catholicity by Her Bible and Prayer Book: And the Struggles of a Soul in Search of Truth (Buffalo: Catholic Publication Company, 1884).

^{11.} Martin John Spalding, Lectures on the Evidences of Catholicity: Delivered in the Cathedral of Louisville, 5th ed. (Baltimore: John Murphy, 1870); cf. E. Brooks Holifield, Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 1–24, 173–196; Mark A. Noll, America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 93–113.

^{12.} Gaustad, New Historical Atlas, 155-159.

Tract Society did not imply unity of worship, polity, or doctrine. Institutional catholicity let Catholics argue—persuasively, to many converts—that they had primacy, tradition, the interpretation of scriptures, and history on their side. Just as important, Catholics had a form of ritual and religious practice that, though foreign and even idolatrous to Protestants, appealed to some more than Protestant devotional practices stripped bare of ritual.

Clarke observed that each Protestant denomination emphasized some truth that provided their adherents a road to Catholicism. In Catholicism, Episcopalians found their "love of religious antiquity and episcopacy"; Presbyterians, "the principle of ecclesiastical authority"; Methodists, the "intense culture of the personality of God and of the Saviour"; Puritans, "their hatred of Erastianism"; evangelicals, their "zeal ... against mere formal religion." The Catholic Church had all the variety of Protestant sectarianism, yet visible unity.

Historians have rightly noted the diversity of converts: authors, artists, and intellectuals, the genteel, and intermarried Protestants and Catholics. ¹⁴ These varied conversions, however, were but part of a much broader movement into the church. Many ordinary converts shared the same yearnings for catholicity as theological elites. A Lutheran coachman in the employ of George Hecker, a wealthy flour magnate and convert to Catholicism, and a benefactor of his brother, Isaac, was received into the Catholic Church at a Paulist mission in New York City. This unnamed Lutheran had read Isaac Hecker's *Questions of the Soul*, in which Hecker laid out his diagnosis of American religion in its opening lines: "The age is out of joint. Men run to and fro to find the truth." Hecker offered a remedy that was no respecter of persons. Only the "Church of Christ" could answer "to the wants of the soul," whether one "be king or slave, rich or poor, artist or laborer, … white or black, young or old, man or woman." The coachman found that the Catholic Church alone could answer "the very same questions his own soul used to ask." ¹⁵

If catholicity was believed to be the mark of the true church, what did Protestants and Catholics think of each other's salvation? Most Protestants, especially evangelicals, regarded Catholics as unconverted and thus unsaved.

^{13.} Clarke, "Our Converts [Part 1]," 542.

^{14.} Allitt, Catholic Converts, Patrick Allitt, "American Women Converts and Catholic Intellectual Life," U.S. Catholic Historian 13, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 57–79; T. J. Jackson Lears, No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 183–214; Anne C. Rose, "Some Private Roads to Rome: The Role of Families in American Victorian Conversions to Catholicism," Catholic Historical Review 85, no. 1 (January 1999): 35; Anne C. Rose, Beloved Strangers: Interfaith Families in Nineteenth-Century America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

^{15.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 1:232; Isaac Thomas Hecker, *Questions of the Soul* (New York: D. Appleton, 1855), 5, 123.

Catholics relied on works rather than grace and faith, said Protestants, and thus had not experienced heart conversion. Evangelical historian and minister Robert Baird (1798–1863) classified Catholicism among the "unevangelical" faiths because Catholics held "those doctrines on which true believers of all ages have placed their hopes for eternal life" yet those beliefs have been "buried amid the rubbish of multiplied human traditions and inventions." Similarly, Catholics regarded Protestants as outside the true church, and thus cut off from the sacraments, true faith in Christ Jesus, and hope of eternal life. By rebelling against the church's faith, embracing false doctrines, cutting themselves off from the sacraments of Eucharist, penance, and extreme unction, Protestants were likely to die outside the church and without salvation.

The Catholic understanding of baptism, however, viewed Protestants as already connected to the Catholic Church. Catholics denied the validity of most Protestant sacraments, but Catholic theology deemed all baptisms valid if they followed the essential form: use of flowing water once or three times, whether through sprinkling, infusion, or immersion, with the Trinitarian formula: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Catholic theologians always abhorred rebaptism, which denied the essential nature of a sacrament as a work of Christ, rather than of the minister. Though normally administered by a bishop or priest, anyone could baptize in a true emergency when the one to be baptized was in danger of death: "This office extends in case of necessity, even to Jews, infidels and heretics, provided, however, they intend to do what the Catholic Church does in that act of her ministry." ¹⁷

The Catholic Church's theology of baptism impacted the mode and meaning of Protestant conversion. If doubt remained about whether baptism had been properly administered, converts received baptism *sub conditione* (conditionally). The priest inaudibly added the words "if you are not yet baptized" to the formula—an acknowledgment that a prior baptism might have put the convert in relationship with the Catholic Church. Though practices varied, conditional baptisms were usually administered privately, but with the full ceremonies of the church. Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick (1798–1863), bishop of Philadelphia and later Baltimore, made "no distinction as regards the ceremonies between conditional and unconditional bap-

^{16.} Robert Baird, Religion in America (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), 269-270.

^{17.} Many American converts knew the church's beliefs about baptism as defined at the Council of Trent (1545–1563). The Catechism of the Council of Trent was the standard Catholic educational text until the 1885 Baltimore Catechism. See The Catechism of the Council of Trent (Baltimore: F. Lucas, 1829), 118–120; Canons of the Council of Trent, seventh session, canons on baptism, canon 4, in The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, trans. H. J. Schroeder (Charlotte: TAN Books, 1971), 53.

tism of adults," but performed the ceremonies when the person "received baptism without ceremonies, as is always the case among the [Protestant] Sects." In other cases converts were not baptized and became Catholic through the "abjuration of heresy" (reciting the Creed of Pope Pius IV, 1565). This creed prefixed the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed with the declaration, "I, N., with a firm faith believe and profess each and everything which is contained in the Creed which the Holy Roman Church maketh use of," and added a statement of belief in the seven sacraments, transubstantiation, and "the Holy Catholic Apostolic Roman Church as the mother and teacher of all churches ... outside of which no one can be saved." 19

This baptismal theology allowed priests inclined to evangelize Protestants to consider them as already a part of the church, but fallen away. Protestants who had not purposely rejected the Catholic Church, but sincerely desired salvation, might belong to the church's "soul." Error only became heresy "when it is error *pertinaciously* maintained and *manifestly* against the faith." Therefore anyone "whether pagans or Protestants" who in good faith was "sincerely desirous of knowing the truth" could belong to the soul of the church.²⁰

Many converts entered the church because they had come to regard themselves as already members through baptism. Protestant clergy were especially likely to come to this realization because of their theological training. Levi Silliman Ives (1797–1867), Episcopal bishop of North Carolina, reading German Catholic theologian Johann Adam Möhler's *Symbolism*, became "convinced, therefore, that I was originally placed by baptism within the pale and under the authority of 'the One Catholic and Apostolic Church'" and to continue separated from it was "an act of deadly schism." Ives concluded that submitting to the Catholic Church, which he did by handing over his episcopal ring to Pope Pius IX in 1852, did not constitute a betrayal of the Protestant Episcopal Church. That church could neither validly ordain him nor forgive his sins after baptism, but it could baptize him into the Catholic Church.²¹

^{18.} Samuel Eccleston to Francis Patrick Kenrick, October 25, 1835, 27A-L-10 and Francis Patrick Kenrick to Samuel Eccleston, October 26, 1835, 25-F-5, Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Associated Archives, St. Mary's College and Seminary, Baltimore, Maryland (hereafter AAB).

^{19.} Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 2:207-211.

^{20.} Clarke, "Our Converts [Part 1]," 539.

^{21.} Levi Silliman Ives, The Trials of a Mind in Its Progress to Catholicism: A Letter to His Old Friends (London: Thomas Richardson, 1854), 11. He read Möhler's Exposition of the Doctrinal Differences Between Catholics and Protestants, as Evidenced by the Symbolical Writings, trans. James Burton Robertson (New York: Edward Dunigan, 1844).

As a young man the Paulist priest, Augustine F. Hewit (1820–1897), learned from his evangelical Congregationalist father that "a baptized person might claim all the privileges of a child of God which are signified by baptism, if he were willing to acknowledge and ratify his own part" in the baptismal vows. His father was referring to the Puritan notion of baptism as a sign of the covenant, an idea from which evangelical Protestantism had mostly fallen away. But Hewit "began at once to fulfill my part of the baptismal compact." Though his theology would later come to more fully embrace the Catholic doctrine of baptism, he believed he "did recover at that time the grace which I had received in baptism," "united to the soul of the Catholic Church," though not yet a Catholic.²² H. H. Wyman traveled from Congregationalism to Catholicism, believing by the time of his conversion that "not to have become a Catholic when I did would have been apostasy from my vows of baptism as a Congregationalist."²³

The Paulists and other mission preachers confronted many Protestants with the doctrine that they were already a part of the Catholic Church. Not coincidently, both Wyman's and Hewit's story appeared in the Paulists' From the Highways of Life. In their hundreds of missions, the Paulists emphasized baptism as the moment of salvation. The parish mission climaxed with the renewal of baptismal promises. Protestant observers often remarked at the power of this closing service. A "Protestant lawyer" called it a "most sublime scene"; he "lay awake the whole night" considering it.²⁴ In Plattsburg, New York, a workingman who had been baptized by one of his fellows in a slaughterhouse came to a mission. He had expressed a desire to become a Catholic; when the priest asked about his baptism, the priest was persuaded of its validity and permitted him to receive communion.²⁵ At North Bridgewater, Connecticut, an Episcopalian was received into the church after the baptism of his infant child, by then deceased. The Paulists recorded that "among the reasons he gave for becoming a Catholic," he said, "I had a dear little child who was baptized in the church, and I know she is gone to heaven, and I'm afraid I would never see her, if I did not become one too."26 In New York City in 1858 the Paulists received many Protestants "besides others also who [though] baptized in the church had never professed themselves Catholics."27

^{22.} Hewit, "How I Became a Catholic," 13-14.

^{23.} H. H. Wyman "Out of Calvinism into Truth," in *From the Highways of Life* (New York: Missionary Society of St. Paul, the Apostle, 1893), 45.

^{24.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 1:82, and undated newspaper clippings opposite that page.

^{25.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 1:152.

^{26.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 2:21.

^{27.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 1:175.

Catholic converts entered the church through a ritual performed by a priest. One could not join by fiat or choice alone: converts were said to have been "received" into the church, rather than to have joined. Alfred Allen Paul Curtis (1831–1908), an Episcopal priest who resigned his pastorate in Baltimore and traveled to England in 1872 to be received into the church by famous Oxford movement convert, John Henry Newman, gave a detailed account of the rituals used in his conditional baptism, general confession, and confirmation. In a letter to a former parishioner, he explained Catholicism's benefits: "[Y]ou find so much you don't understand, and that makes you feel as if you had gone back a long way, and turned baby again. And it's very nice to be a baby when you have such a grand thing as the Church to take you in its arms and carry you along." The rituals of conversion created for Curtis the peace of submitting to an authoritative mother church rather than be perpetually uncertain: "It is so very nice to leave off pretending to know and to judge, and to be quite certain that you are where the judging will be done for you. I just believe whatever I am told, and I have been told nothing that I find any difficulty in receiving."28

Chronological Contours

Scattered Conversions from Protestantism, 1780s-1830s

Catholic-Protestant animosity was as old as the Reformation, but Catholic and Protestant alike had to reckon with the new possibility of Enlightenment infidelity. Both had long accused the other of being a halfway house to atheism. Protestants argued that the excesses of Catholic "superstition" provoked rejecting faith altogether; Catholics argued that the Protestant tendency to pare away the faith would leave nothing. These arguments had a frightening immediacy in an age when Deists and rationalists published books like *The Age of Reason* (Thomas Paine) and *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (Ethan Allen). The United States had a strong "infidel" presence from

^{28.} Curtis, letter to unnamed former parishioner, April 20, 1872, in Visititation Nuns, *The Life and Characteristics of the Right Reverend Alfred A. Curtis* (New York: P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1913), 49–50. This is not to suggest that converts had an easy time when they entered the church. Married Protestant clergymen such as Levi Silliman Ives gave up their livelihood because they could not become priests. Ives was left impoverished, and Archbishop Francis Kenrick established a convert relief fund and sought a position for Ives with great difficulty. John Baptist Purcell to Francis Patrick Kenrick, September 17, 1853 (31-B-10); Martin John Spalding to Francis Patrick Kenrick, March 12, 1856 (32A-N-23); Francis Patrick Kenrick to Marin John Spalding, April 29, 1854 (34-J-20); all in Archbishop Kenrick Papers, AAB. Many converts felt what John Henry Newman described as the "darkness" and "perplexity and dismay" of conversion; see John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), 191.

the 1790s through the early 1800s.²⁹ Protestants, Catholics, and unbelievers debated how to acquire certain knowledge of religious truth, setting the parameters by which potential converts sought religion.

The converts of the early republic often expressed a fear not in choosing between Protestantism and Catholicism, but between Catholicism and infidelity. Stephen Blyth stated the dilemma: "Thus it appears that out of the Catholic Church, there is no rational resource but Deism. Too often the alternative is worse than this—and many an example has there been of a Catholic, after rejecting the authority of his native church, becoming an Atheist." Blyth had seriously considered infidelity, embracing Catholicism to distance himself from it as far as possible. A Protestant critic of Blyth's narrative agreed that "there is less distance than is thought between Skepticism and Popery; and that a mind wearied by perpetual doubt willingly seeks repose in the bosom of a Church which pretends to infallibility." In 1835 Pierce Connelly wrote that the "confusion" of Protestantism had left him afraid of infidelity: "I scarcely know how, or where I stand in my confusion; but for Christ's blessed promises to the church, I should be utterly overthrown in faith and hope." 31

This triangular nexus among Catholicism, Protestantism, and infidelity impacted a set of early conversions. Fanny Allen (1794–1819), daughter of the famed Revolutionary war leader and Deist Ethan Allen (1738–1789), was reared without any religion. Fanny Allen's mother and stepfather raised her, consenting to her baptism in the Episcopal Church in her late teens solely as an antidote against Catholicism before she left to learn French in a Montreal convent. There Allen remained a skeptic, refusing the nuns' entreaties to piety. The turning point came when one of the sisters asked her to put flowers near the tabernacle and to adore the reserved sacrament, believed by Catholics to be the Body and Blood of Jesus. Allen ridiculed the notion, but when she tried to enter the sanctuary with the flowers she felt

^{29.} Ethan Allen, Reason the Only Oracle of Man; or, A Compendious System of Natural Religion (Bennington, VT: Haswell & Russell, 1784); Thomas Paine, The Age of Reason (London: R. Carlile, 1818); Amanda Porterfield, Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); Eric R. Schlereth, An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

^{30.} Blyth, Apology, 51; George J. Mountain, A Letter to Mr. S.C. Blyth, Occasioned by the Recent Publication of the Narrative of His Conversion to the Romish Faith (Montreal: Nahum Mower, 1822), 11.

^{31.} Pierce Connelly, A Letter to the Right Reverend Dr. Otey, Bishop of Tennessee, on the Resignation of the Rectorship of Trinity Church, Natchez (Natchez, MS: Office of the Free Trader, 1835), 20, 23. On the imagined place of the "infidel," see Martin E. Marty, The Infidel: Freethought and American Religion (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1961).

herself bodily barred at the doorway three times. She returned home to Vermont resolving to convert; her parents and most of the townspeople furiously opposed her, but the independently-minded Allen soon returned to Montreal and became a Catholic.³²

Before Fanny Allen's death, Episcopal priest Daniel Barber (1756–1834), father to the priest who had baptized her into that church, visited her. Barber came to investigate her conversion as part of his own path to Catholicism. Barber, born a Congregationalist, joined the Episcopal Church after hearing an Episcopalian call into question whether Congregationalism was a true church. Barber, persuaded that Congregationalist ministers lacked a line of succession back to the apostles since their ministers were not properly ordained by bishops, was ordained an Episcopal priest three years later and served as pastor in Claremont, New Hampshire, for thirty years. His son, Virgil Barber (1782–1847), also became an Episcopal priest and school teacher.³³

Around 1818, the Episcopal foundations of the Barber family began to crumble. Daniel Barber's views on apostolic succession were shaken when he read a book challenging the ordination of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker. Barber began to doubt whether he had been validly ordained. He traveled to Boston to talk with the Catholic bishop Jean-Louis Lefebvre de Cheverus (1768–1836), one especially adept at dealing with converts. Cheverus gave him an armload of books to take back to his family, including a version of the lives of the saints and John Milner's *The End of Controversy*.³⁴

Virgil Barber and his wife Jerusha (1789–1860) read Milner and a novena booklet he borrowed from an Irish servant. Virgil made his own visit to New York to speak with the Jesuit priest, later bishop, Benedict Joseph Fenwick (1782–1846). In 1816 Virgil and Jerusha, along with their five children, were the first Barbers to enter the church, persuaded by Milner's arguments. Virgil then brought to New Hampshire the Dominican priest, Charles Ffrench, who preached a mission at Daniel Barber's home. Though she is little mentioned in records, the linchpin in the family's conversion seems to have been Daniel's wife, Chloe Barber (1746?–1825). After reading Catholic books she determined to convert under Ffrench; her other children and her sister, niece, and eventually nephew (a future bishop) converted.

^{32.} Louis de Goesbriand, Catholic Memoirs of Vermont and New Hampshire (Burlington, VT, 1886), 14, 18-20.

^{33.} de Goesbriand, Memoirs, 33. Daniel Barber, Catholic Worship and Piety, Explained and Recommended (Washington, DC: E. De Krafft, 1821), 28-37.

^{34.} Daniel Barber, *The History of My Own Times*, 3 vols. (Washington, DC: S. C. Ustick, 1827); de Goesbriand, *Memoirs*, 29-67.

Daniel Barber was the first to investigate Catholicism but the last to enter the church, after more than a dozen family members.³⁵

Milner's polemical work—read by nearly every convert who mentioned the books they read—had brought the Barber family into the church. Justifying his choice, Daniel Barber explained, "I am a Catholic, because I have examined: do you the same, and you will be one too." Barber added that his newfound Catholicism and the unity of his family provided relief from the era's religious confusion. For proof of the Protestant denominational system's drawbacks, he asked his readers to look into "our own country, into our neighborhood, into our own family. How rent and torn asunder, by dividing into sects and parties, even to the destruction of that love, peace, and harmony."³⁶

The Critical Period in Catholic Conversion, 1840s-1860s

The critical period for conversions to Catholicism, the 1840s to the end of the Civil War, was not simply a time of increased conversions, but the structural reasons for conversion changed to encourage reception into the Catholic Church. This change resulted in part because the Oxford movement and Transcendentalism elevated the idea of catholicity among certain Protestants, and many were growing dissatisfied with the confusion and chaos of American religion as movements and denominations multiplied. But converts to the Catholic Church during this period, especially priests like the Paulists or apologists like Brownson, drove the conversion movement by setting out to convert others.

Beginning in the 1840s, converts came into the church in much greater numbers and for more than individual reasons. Jon Gjerde estimates that 60,000 became Catholics between 1831 and 1860.³⁷ Catholicity appealed primarily to two groups: those closest to Catholicism and those furthest away. Catholics made converts from the Episcopal Church, a denomination which had preserved some Catholic practices and doctrines, and from Unitarianism or other liberal Christian denominations, which had rejected those doctrines entirely. Catholic missionary priests observed this trend. Augustine

^{35.} Information about the controversial Ffrench is scarce; see Lawrence A. Desmond and Donna M. Norell, *The Case for Fr. Charles Dominic Ffrench (1775–1851)* (Yorkton, Saskatchewan: Laverdure & Associates, 2004).

^{36.} Barber, History, 4, 17; de Goesbriand, Memoirs, 61–67; Daniel Barber, Catholic Worship and Piety, Explained and Recommended (Washington, DC: E. De Krafft, 1821).

^{37.} Jon Gjerde, Catholicism and the Shaping of Nineteenth-Century America, ed. S. Deborah Kang (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 16. Gjerde cites Allitt, Catholic Converts, without page number; I have not found that Allitt makes that claim.

F. Hewit wrote that most Catholic authors aimed to win converts either from Protestantism's "extreme left" (Unitarians and Transcendentalists) or from most conservative branches of Protestants ("high church" Episcopalians). E. Rameur concurred, finding that Protestant denominations furnished converts in unequal numbers: "[T]he two sects which furnish the most [converts] are the Episcopalians, who, in their forms and traditions, approach nearest to the Catholic Church, and the Unitarians, who go to the very opposite extreme, and appear to push their philosophical and rationalistic principles almost beyond the pale of Christianity."³⁸

On the basis of several decades of mission work, Hewit noted that "the greater number of converts in our own day have been either from the one or the other of these two classes." Isaac Hecker concurred in his own summary of the paths that converts took.³⁹ Hecker and Hewit themselves were exceptions as Hecker had been influenced by his mother's evangelical Methodism and Hewit had been raised as a Congregationalist, but Hecker first associated with Transcendentalists and Hewit became an Episcopalian before becoming Catholic.⁴⁰

The greatest source of converts to Catholicism in the 1840s and 1850s were Episcopalians who already believed themselves "catholic." At New York City's General Theological Seminary, a group of students, among them Clarence Walworth, James McMaster (1820-1886), Arthur Carey (1822-1844), and Edgar Wadhams, trod very close to the boundary between Canterbury and Rome, sometimes crossing it. These students saw themselves as disciples of John Henry Newman, Edward Pusey, and other leaders of the English Oxford movement. Unlike the Oxford movement's members, however, these youths were not ordained and held no positions of note within the church. Though Newman argued for the compatibility of the Anglican Church's doctrinal statements with Catholic doctrine in his famous Tract 90, the American students delighted in provoking the Protestant sensibilities of their coreligionists. Nearly all of them—including Walworth, McMaster, and Wadhams—had rejected their parents' Reformed Presbyterianism or Congregationalism to join the Episcopal Church as young adults. They reveled in the language and trappings of Catholicism. In Greek class they translated a phrase from the New Testament as "penance" rather than the Protestant

^{38.} Rameur, "Progress of the Church," 11.

^{39.} Augustine Francis Hewit, The King's Highway; or, The Catholic Church in the Way of Salvation as Revealed in the Holy Scriptures (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1874), iii.

^{40.} Augustine Francis Hewit, "How I Became a Catholic," in *From the Highways of Life*; John Farina, *An American Experience of God: The Spirituality of Isaac Hecker* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 16–17.

rendering "confess," they bought rosaries, and they decorated the chapel for Christmas with garlands and a cross until forced to take them down.

The General Theological Seminary students went to great lengths to uphold catholicity. In June of 1843, Clarence Walworth (1820–1900) waded into the salty waters of the bay around New York City to be baptized for the second time. The Episcopalian minister who baptized him immersed Walworth three times while pronouncing the baptismal formula "in the Name of the FATHER and of the SON and of the HOLY GHOST." Afterwards the minister signed a certificate of baptism prepared in Walworth's hand, "heavily done in imitation of Old English lettering, ornamentally shaded with red." The Episcopal Church had not enjoined Walworth to be re-baptized, nor did it prescribe the "mode of 'trine immersion'" in its prayer book. This bizarre ritual, Walworth's attempt to be sure he had a valid, "catholic" baptism, borrowed elements from every branch of Christianity and thus conformed to none.⁴²

Walworth, baptized as a Presbyterian as a child, began attending an Episcopal church while practicing law, because his "fellow lodger" was the church organist. When Walworth was confirmed in the Episcopal Church in 1839, he claimed that "no questions had been put to me as to what I believed or did not believe." His theological opinions were unschooled but broadly Protestant, save for a distaste for the doctrine of justification by faith alone. "With these convictions," Walworth thought, "I could without scruple have become a Presbyterian or Methodist as readily as an Episcopalian."

His theology became better defined when he gave up his law practice in 1842 to study at the Episcopal General Theological Seminary. The first shock came from James McMaster, an intelligent but impetuous student, who introduced Walworth to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration in a debate, though he never managed to locate his proof text from the New Testament. The kindly Arthur Carey later identified the text in Acts of the Apostles and explained that baptism washed away sins and regenerated the soul. Walworth was persuaded very slowly, for he thought that "the idea of grace conveyed to the soul by means of a sacramental ceremony is something utterly inconsistent with the ordinary training of a Protestant mind." But

^{41.} The biblical passage at issue was Hebrews 6:4–6. The Authorized (King James) Version used by Protestants translated the relevant phrase as "to renew them again unto repentance"; the Catholic Douay-Rheims versions translated it as "to be renewed again to penance," and Clarence Walworth translated it as "to be renewed again by penance." See Clarence Walworth, *The Oxford Movement in America: Or, Glimpses of Life in an Anglican Seminary* (New York: Catholic Book Exchange, 1895), 25.

^{42.} Walworth, Oxford Movement, 31.

once he was persuaded, this new doctrine became "the entering wedge of a new faith, far broader and deeper than any I then conceived of as possible."

As a seminary student, Walworth frequently discussed the role of baptism within catholicity. Some at the seminary doubted that dissenting clergymen were truly ordained. At stake was the Episcopalian and Anglican claim that their church had maintained apostolic succession, allowing them a share in the "one true catholic apostolic church." Some seminarians maintained that dissenting clergymen were actually laymen, and because they held baptism by laymen as invalid (a doctrine peculiar to high church Episcopalians), they concluded that Protestants were not in fact members of the church. Walworth was dismayed and could only exclaim that as "the child of Presbyterian parents" the "opinions expressed … would sound very strangely." Carey, presiding over the meeting, defined those Protestants as "Christians" but not part of the "Church."

In time Walworth believed his previous baptism invalid and asked Rector Caleb Clapp to rectify the deficiency with the waters of the Hudson River and Atlantic Ocean. On this depended his membership in the true church and the forgiveness of his sins. In later years Walworth accepted what the better-read McMaster and Carey likely already knew: the Catholic Church recognized his Presbyterian baptism as valid. In 1843, Walworth sought catholicity but had not yet found it in communion with Rome, then confusing catholicity with a kind of Christian pluralism which he thought his baptismal rite and certificate guaranteed.⁴⁵

Such idiosyncratic attempts at catholicity within the Episcopal Church failed due to the Protestant wing's opposition and their own theological incoherence. When Arthur Carey came up for ordination in 1843, the pastor under whom he had served and other clergymen questioned whether he held to the Thirty-Nine Articles (the doctrinal statement of the Episcopal Church) or whether his expressed views were too close to the Catholic Church. Within two years, nearly all of his fellow students with Romanizing tendencies converted to Catholicism. Wadhams and Walworth tried to

^{43.} Walworth, *Oxford Movement*, 9. The students had difficulty finding the text because two passages in Acts refer to the Apostle Paul's baptism. Acts 9:18 is the first recounting, but it does not mention regeneration. When Paul later gave a speech in Jerusalem about his conversion, he mentioned that Ananias told him, "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins" (Acts 22:16 KJV).

^{44.} Walworth, Oxford Movement, 10.

^{45.} Walworth, Oxford Movement, 33.

^{46.} A Full and True Statement of the Examination and Ordination of Mr. Arthur Carey (New York: James A. Sparks, 1843).

found a two-person monastery in western New York, but soon gave up and joined the Catholic Church.

Levi Silliman Ives embraced Catholicism more slowly—after coming under heavy fire in his diocese for trying to institute "papist" rituals and to establish a monastery, and for his defense of slaveholders. By submitting to the pope he acknowledged that catholicity could be found only in communion with the See of Rome. ⁴⁷ Those years proved the end of any serious U.S.-based Oxford movement; its failure at the hands of the Protestants within the church meant that nearly all its participants moved on to Rome. Over the coming years a number of Episcopal priests, among them Francis A. Baker (another future Paulist) and Alfred Curtis relinquished their pastorates and converted.

The future leader of this band of Episcopalian converts took an altogether different route to Catholicism. Isaac Hecker, a working-class German American from New York, came to the church through evangelicalism and Transcendentalism. Hecker's mother was a Methodist, and at times Hecker attended Methodist revivals on his own. Though he never thought of himself as a Methodist, the evangelistic tradition strongly influenced him. From the base of his family's bakery, where he worked long, exhausting days with his elder brothers John and George, Hecker participated in democratic and social reform movements and corresponded with Brownson.⁴⁸ Hecker's connections to reformers, especially Brownson, led him to fall in with a number of Unitarians and Transcendentalists. Beginning in 1843 he spent months at the utopian communities at Brook Farm and Fruitlands in the company of other Transcendentalists. For all its individualism, anti-Trinitarianism, and denial of dogma, the environment at Brook Farm encouraged conversion to Catholicism; its emphasis on spirituality led to Catholic devotional practice and its valuing of universal brotherhood led to catholicity. Hecker was not alone: Sophia Ripley (1803–1861) also converted. Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804– 1864) went to Rome after Brook Farm and considered Catholicism, while his daughter Rose (1851–1926) became a Dominican sister (Mother Alphonsa of the Servants of Relief for Incurable Cancer). William Henry Channing and his wife Julia would have likely converted except for fearing his reputation would suffer. 49 Charles Dana wrote to Hecker about his vision "of a society which

^{47.} Levi Silliman Ives, *The Priestly Office: A Pastoral Letter to the Clergy of North Carolina* (New York: Stanford and Swords, 1849); Michael Taylor Malone, "Levi Silliman Ives: Priest, Bishop, Tractarian, and Roman Catholic Convert" (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1970).

^{48.} Farina, American Experience, 16-17.

^{49.} John Farina, Isaac T. Hecker, The Diary: Romantic Religion in Ante-bellum America (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 63; Anne C. Rose, Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830–1850 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

shall be a church & a church which shall be a society" and which he called "that Holy Catholic Church which both you and I have at heart." Dana thought that "we shall best discharge our unspeakable debt to her [the Catholic Church] by passing into the new Church." And James Kay, Jr., argued with Hecker that "all the action of Christendom has been retrograde since Apostolic times" so "we arrive at Association as the true Church." These Transcendentalists sought catholicity in the midst of their individualism; for a few of them their catholicity led them to the Catholic Church. ⁵⁰

Hecker, dissatisfied with Transcendentalism as too diffuse and individualistic and unable to meet his longing for catholicity, worked out the problem in a long series of letters with Brownson. Hecker signed his letters "deinen Sohn" ("your son"), though within a few years Brownson would address him as "Father Hecker."51 He and Brownson determined to convert to the "catholic church" leaving them to consider, which church was the catholic church—the Episcopal Church, which claimed to be a branch of the true church, or the Roman Catholic Church? Hecker wrote to Brownson that "at present I am not a member of any branch of the Catholic Church, but whatever branch I may be led to unite myself to, it would be as a Catholic to labor for the reunion and catholicity of the Church, as the prerequisite to all other movements which have for their object the advancement of Humanity."52 Hecker first questioned Samuel Seabury, the Episcopalian bishop of New York, about his church's catholicity. Seabury strongly argued the Episcopal Church was catholic and the Roman church was not. Hecker wondered whether some Roman practices, especially the "assumptions of power assumed by the Pope of Rome," made the Catholic Church "cling to ... practices which are not Catholic." Nevertheless, Hecker wrote to his brothers that the Episcopal Church could not really claim catholicity either because of its separation from Rome.⁵³ Greatly concerned with catholicity, when Hecker visited a group of Shakers in Harvard, Massachusetts, he inquired how "they justify their departure from the Catholic Church." "Their replies were very dubious and unsatisfactory," Hecker recorded, doubtless because they could scarcely conceive of the question agitating him.⁵⁴

^{50.} Charles Dana to Isaac Hecker, January 2, 1844 and James Kay Jr. to Isaac Hecker, April 14, 1844, in Isaac Hecker Papers, PHA (hereafter Hecker Papers).

^{51.} Hecker to Brownson, March 28, 1844, in Joseph F. Gower and Richard M. Leliaert, eds., *The Brownson-Hecker Correspondence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 88–90.

^{52.} Hecker to Brownson, March 15, 1844, in Correspondence, 86.

^{53.} Hecker to Brownson, April 7, 1844 in *Correspondence*, 93-94; Hecker to his brothers, April 19, 1844, Hecker Papers. Hecker gave many details of his searching for the "catholic church" in letters to his brothers, June 11, 1844; June 14, 1844; June 19, 1844.

^{54.} Isaac Hecker to his brothers, April 24, 1844, Hecker Papers.

Hecker was received into the Catholic Church in 1844. Five years later, he, Walworth, Hewit, and several other converts joined the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (Redemptorists), a band of priests who gave missions throughout the country. After joining the church Hecker had written the Redemptorist superior, "I believe that Providence calls me ... to America to convert a certain class of persons amongst whom I found myself before my conversion." The Redemptorists provided the opportunity for Hecker and the others to fulfill that call by traveling the country from parish to parish conducting missions. For a period of a week or two weeks, at each parish the priests preached several times a day and heard thousands of confessions. The missions aimed to revive Catholicism among Irish and German immigrants, many of whom had only the most tenuous connection to their childhood faith. The Redemptorists brought Catholics back into the fold, often hearing adults' first confessions and administering their first communion. ⁵⁶

During the five years that Hecker and the convert priests were Redemptorists, they made scores of converts. Hecker sometimes ended his missions with "an extremely eloquent and popular lecture on Popular Objections to Catholicity." But Hecker always considered the Redemptorists' efforts to convert Protestants inadequate. Hecker published *Questions of the Soul* (1855) and *Aspirations of Nature* (1857), arguing that the longings of individual souls and the collective good of the nation could only be found in the Catholic Church. The Redemptorist provincial and the bishops who granted permission for the missions were favorable to the idea of evangelism, but they could ill afford to pay attention to Protestants with so many unchurched Catholics. 58

Hecker gained the permission of his local superior to travel to Rome and present his proposal for increased evangelism of Protestants. Upon Hecker's arrival the Redemptorist superior expelled him from the order supposedly for breaking his vows of obedience and poverty. Hecker persisted in his plea, spending months in Rome working through Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò (1801–1874) and Propaganda Fide (the Roman dicastery that oversaw mission work in the church, including the United States) to bring his case before the pope. Hecker gained the pope's notice for winning a notable conversion: George Loring Brown (1814–1889), one of many artists in the American colony at Rome. After spending a few months in Hecker's company, he converted. Hecker wrote to his fellow Redemptorists that the conversion "has operated greatly in our favor, for it has gone through all the papers in

^{55.} Hecker to Mon. T. R. Père [Michael Heilig], 30 May 1848, Hecker Papers; also quoted in *Correspondence*, 20.

^{56.} Dolan, Catholic Revivalism, 25-90; Paulist Mission Chronicles, 1:6.

^{57.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 1:93.

^{58.} Isaac Thomas Hecker, Aspirations of Nature (New York: J. B. Kirker, 1857).

Europe, & you should know that here in Rome a conversion excites among the Italians a great interest." Hearing of the conversion, Pope Pius IX granted Hecker permission to establish a new religious community.⁵⁹

Hecker returned to New York in March of 1858. The former Redemptorists bound themselves voluntarily, without vows, to a new community they called the Missionary Priests of St. Paul the Apostle (popularly, called Paulists). The Paulists, all of whom were converts at the community's founding, took as their apostolate the conversion of Protestant America. By the middle of April they had preached their first mission, making five converts in Watertown, New York, then fifteen at St. Bridget's Church in the city. By the Civil War's end, they had held 167 missions, receiving 422 converts into the church. From the parish in New York, the Paulists traveled up and down the eastern seaboard and into the Midwest and South. While most of their missions were in places like Boston and New York where there were many Catholics—but also many non-Catholics—they also attended to newly-established dioceses and small towns and hamlets, winning converts from the dominant Protestant population. 60

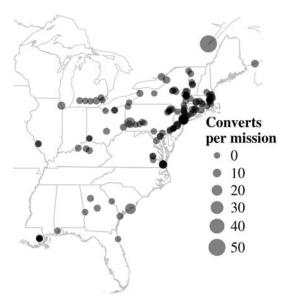
The Paulists' success won the approval of the wing of the U.S. hierarchy desiring to Americanize the church.⁶¹ They invited Hecker to preach at the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore (1866), an assembly of bishops to legislate for the unity and discipline of the church in the Civil War's aftermath. At the council the church faced the task of evangelization, especially of newly-freed slaves. The Paulists believed that "a great apostolate awaits among the colored people of the southern states," and noted with lament "how little has been done in the past for the conversion of the Colored people." But the Paulists traveled less in the South after the war and made only a few black converts.⁶² At the council Hecker preached on "The Future Triumph of the Church." Therein Hecker predicted that Catholicism would spread across the country through the Holy Spirit's working because only the

^{59.} Isaac Hecker to Redemptorists, April 1858, Hecker Papers.

^{60.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 1:175.

^{61.} Gerald P. Fogarty, The Vatican and the American Hierarchy from 1870 to 1965 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1982); Douglas J. Slawson, Ambition and Arrogance: Cardinal William O'Connell of Boston and the American Catholic Church (San Diego, CA: Cobalt Productions, 2007); William L. Portier, Divided Friends: Portraits of the Roman Catholic Modernist Crisis in the United States (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013); Thomas Timothy McAvoy, The Americanist Heresy in Roman Catholicism, 1895–1900 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963); Robert D. Cross, The Emergence of Liberal Catholicism in America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).

^{62.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 2:405; 3:95; Patrick Carey, Catholics in America: A History (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 45; Cyprian Davis, The History of Black Catholics in the United States (New York: Crossroad, 1990).



Redemptorist and Paulist missions, 1852-1865. For an interactive version of the maps supplied in this article, see http://lincolnmullen.com/projects/paulists-map/.

Catholic Church satisfied the age's desire for catholicity.⁶³ A papal invitation to Protestants, calling them to return to the "One Fold of Christ," echoed Hecker's evangelism. Pope Pius IX, who during his long reign held audiences with dozens of American converts including Jane Minot Sedgwick II (1821–1889), Hecker, and George Bliss, wrote a letter in 1868 addressed to

all those who, whilst they acknowledge the same Jesus Christ as the Redeemer, and glory in the name of Christian, yet do not profess the true faith of Christ, nor hold to and follow the Communion of the Catholic Church. And We do this to warn, and conjure, and beseech them with all the warmth of Our zeal, and in all charity, to consider and seriously examine whether they follow the path marked out for them by Jesus Christ our Lord, and which leads to Eternal Salvation.⁶⁴

James Kent Stone (1840–1921), the Episcopalian president of New York's Hobart College, read the appeal at first with "rather contemptuous pity for the august Writer," since Stone thought he had solved the "Roman prob-

^{63.} Sermons Delivered During the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore, October 1866 (Baltimore: Kelly & Piet, 1866), 66–86.

^{64.} James Kent Stone, *The Invitation Heeded: Reasons for a Return to Catholic Unity* (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1870), 5–13.

lem" and regarded himself "as a genuine Catholic." But as a boy Stone had seen Pope Pius IX in Rome and he imagined the pope personally reading the letter to him. After reading Möhler's *Symbolism*, he concluded,

Surely, if there be a Kingdom of Heaven upon earth, it must be known by marks which cannot be mistaken. Yes! I knew it when I had found it. And I found it as in the parable, like a treasure hidden in a field—the self-same field up and down which I had wandered for years, and where I had often trampled it under my feet.

Stone resigned his college presidency and Episcopal ordination, converted to Catholicism in December 1869, and after his wife's death, became a Paulist priest in 1872.⁶⁵

The Paulists fell on hard times after the Civil War. Because of illness and fewer priests they restricted their efforts to New York and discontinued missions from 1866 to 1871. But new converts like Stone swelled their ranks. The Paulists became known as a religious community that embraced converts, putting them to work converting others. ⁶⁶ By 1870 the convert movement had survived a critical period, poised to spread across the United States with renewed Paulist missions.

The Spread of Catholic Conversion, 1870s-1890s

When the Paulists resumed their missions in the 1870s, they intensified their work. Before the Civil War they averaged about 30 converts per year. From the 1870s to the 1890s they averaged between 80 and 110, and after the 1890s, nearly 450 annually. In all they preached 1,684 missions and won 5,882 converts by the beginning of 1907—the year when the Paulists ceased keeping detailed records due to the large number of missions.⁶⁷ The Paulists were but one religious community: for every Paulist mission, there were several additional Redemptorist, Passionist, or Jesuit missions.⁶⁸

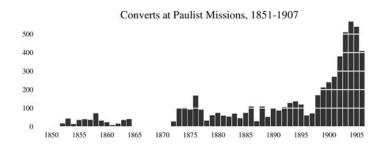
The converts the Paulists received into the church at their missions represented only a portion of those they persuaded to investigate Catholicism. Since the Paulists were usually in a locality for less than two weeks, those they

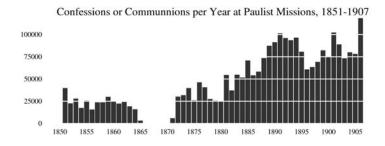
^{65.} Stone, *Invitation Heeded*, 30–31. Stone received a rejoinder in Leonard Woolsey Bacon, *How the Rev. Dr. Stone Bettered His Situation* (New York: American and Foreign Christian Union, 1870). Bacon objected to Stone relying on baptism rather than faith in Christ, and in particular mocked his "hypothetical [i.e. conditional] baptism" (1–16).

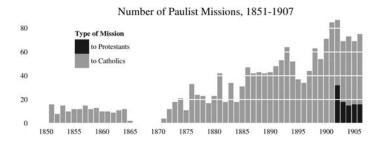
^{66.} Roll of Paulist members, typescript, PHA; Paulist Mission Chronicles, 2:43; Stone, *Invitation Heeded*, 7, 24, 30–31. Stone eventually left the Paulists and became a Passionist priest, bringing to his new religious community a concern for the conversion of Protestant America.

^{67.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 1:163-166; 2: flyleaf; 5:318-320.

^{68.} Dolan, Catholic Revivalism, 21.



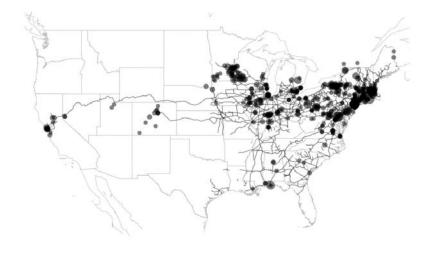




Summary of Paulist Missions, 1851–1907

received into the church were those who could be prepared in a short time. For example, at a mission in Wilmington, Delaware in 1872, the Paulists recorded no conversions. But "one negro and seven other persons presented themselves as converts but too late to be instructed and received on the mission." The fathers were generally reluctant to accept converts quickly unless they could be thoroughly instructed. One woman who had been both an Episcopalian and a Baptist in Newport, New York, was instructed "with great pleasure," but "she desired to be received privately into the church, & to be allowed to conceal her profession of faith." The priests refused to allow a private conversion, so she received a conditional baptism in public. The Paulists acknowledged "a danger in receiving one with so short a prepara-

^{69.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 2:55.



Converts per mission • 0 • 10 • 20

Paulist missions, 1871-1893. After the Civil War, the Paulists greatly increased their missions in the West and Midwest, traveling east and west on the railroads rather than north and south on coasting vessels. The railroads in 1870 are mapped from data compiled by William G. Thomas III, Richard Healey, et al., Railroads and the Making of Modern America, http://railroads.unl.edu.

tion, but it was felt that to leave her to the necessity of a new struggle, after she had once conquered her difficulties, & opened her heart in confidence would be perilous & cruel."⁷⁰ The local pastor often received additional converts into the church after the Paulists departed, as in Holyoke, Massachusetts, where "seven Protestants made application, and five were admitted before the close, by baptism & profession of faith into the bosom of the church."⁷¹ When the Paulists returned later to the same place, they often found that those whom they had impressed earlier had converted.⁷² Even those Protestants who did not ask for instruction still gained a more positive impression of Catholicism. As the chronicler detailed, "A great many Protestants attended the mission and though only a few were received, yet a vast amount of prejudice was removed and good of soil prepared for the future growth of the Faith in their hearts."⁷³

^{70.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 1:289.

^{71.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 1:283.

^{72.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 2:65.

^{73.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 3:135-136.







Paulist Fathers Edward Brady (1846–1895), Augustine Hewit (1820–1897), and Isaac Hecker (1818–1888) (Images in public domain).

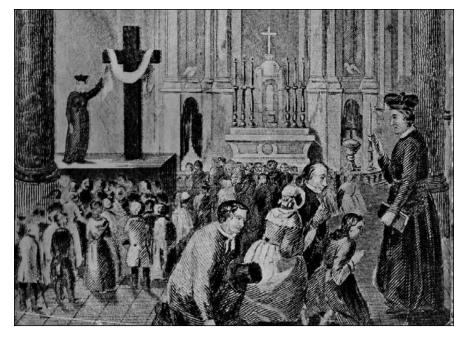
The Paulists expanded their missions, continuing to offer most in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic, but also the Midwest. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio all received frequent visits from the Paulists. Reflecting a wider split that would eventually be made apparent in the controversy over Americanism, the Catholic hierarchy divided over the value of the Paulist's apostolate. Because the Paulists had to be invited by a bishop, they usually traveled to dioceses presided over by Americanist-leaning bishops, such as Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, Minnesota, one of the champions of the Paulists. Hefore the Civil War the Paulists had traveled up and down the seaboard in coasting vessels; after the war they traveled east and west on railroads. The railroads allowed them access to more places more frequently. To

Next the Paulists expanded to the West. In 1875 Father Adrian L. Rosecrans, son of Civil War general and convert, William S. Rosecrans, led a series of missions in the West. At the cathedral in San Francisco, Rosecrans found "a great many converts" already and made several more; in Salt Lake City, he noticed "several converts from Mormonism found here who were devout Catholics."⁷⁶ From his experience with converts, Rosecrans thought that "if

^{74.} Marvin Richard O'Connell, *John Ireland and the American Catholic Church* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 287–289. The publication of Walter Elliot's biography of Hecker, of course, sparked the Americanist controversy. See McAvoy, *Americanist Heresy*.

^{75.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 3:140.

^{76.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 2:108.



An engraving depicting a parish mission. The priest in the background preaches dramatically while gesturing to the mission cross. In the back right, a baptismal font is visible; the font was often brought on the platform during the renewal of baptismal vows on the last night of the mission. The priest in the foreground blesses those kneeling (Image in public domain).

anything is to convert the Mormons it certainly is the Catholic Religion—for they seem to take to it, so to speak, better than to any other."⁷⁷

Something of the grit of these Paulist missionaries can be seen in the missions conducted by Father Edward Brady (1846–1895) in Colorado. Diagnosed with a throat problem, perhaps an early stage of the cancer from which he eventually died, Brady was ordered in the winter of 1881–1882 to Colorado to recuperate. Brady's definition of resting his throat was preaching a dozen missions, sometimes in the city of Boulder but other times in small mining camps reached by crossing the continental divide on snowshoes. With the help of local priests he heard about 5,000 confessions from Catholics with little connection to the church and made a dozen converts.⁷⁸ During the 1890s the Paulists had established another mission band in the West, making Western and Southwestern missions a regular part of their

^{77.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 2:124.

^{78.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 2:454-259.

work.⁷⁹ The Paulists further extended their work by targeting Protestants with specially-crafted mission talks such as "Why I Became a Catholic." Though Protestants had always been welcome to attend the missions, by the early twentieth century the Paulists began to hold missions specifically for non-Catholics.

The extension of Paulist missions fed an expanding number of Protestants and Catholics concerned with spiritual interiority. Jay Dolan has argued that these missions, functioning like Protestant revivals, allowed for a type of conversion for Catholics who had little or no connection to their faith. At one mission the Paulists received fifteen converts from Protestantism, but also took in "others also who [though] baptized in the church had never professed themselves Catholics." In Protestant theology, those who committed themselves to the church would have been considered converts if they experienced the interior workings of grace. In Catholic theology, conversion accompanied accepting the true faith and rejecting Protestant heresy. Even for Catholics, returning to faith from indifference was a kind of a conversion akin to a conversion from Protestantism. The missions equated those with an inherited religious identity who returned to the church with those who crossed religious boundaries. For Protestants and Catholics, whether converts or not, religion became more of a chosen identity, even for those whose ethnicity and inheritance strongly influenced one's religion.80

Conclusion

By viewing the contours of nineteenth-century conversion to Catholicism, one can observe a series of distinct patterns. Scattered conversions to Catholicism gave way to a generation of converts in the 1840s and 1850s who brought about the conversions of thousands of others by the end of the century. These patterns of conversion indicate that conversion to Catholicism was not an option for many until they became unsettled by the diversity of American religion in a voluntary, disestablished system. What was "American" about American religion in this period was not only the flowering of diversity, but the real dissatisfaction with the multitude of religious choices, expressing itself in the decisions of many to convert to Catholicism.

^{79.} Jay Dolan provides a rich reading of individual mission chronicles combined with quantitative analysis of class in the New York City missions. This article extends his analysis across space by using the data the Paulists recorded about their missions. See Dolan, *Catholic Revivalism*, 113–137.

^{80.} Paulist Mission Chronicles, 1:175.