

# Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

*Priest, Patriot and Leader: The Story of Archbishop Carroll* (by Eva Betz)

If you've read the previous title in this series (*Charles Carroll and the American Revolution*), you will already know about Fr. John Carroll and the unsuccessful trip to Canada to persuade that nation to support the American colonies' quest for independence. Over one quarter of *Priest, Patriot and Leader* is devoted to this event. The reader might find the length of this narrative unnecessary, given the mission's outcome. But that would be wrong. These first three chapters establish in our minds some realities of colonial America that portend so much for Fr. Carroll's future:

- We are reminded how arduous and dangerous travel was in those days—something we can barely comprehend now that a road trip from Maryland to Montreal takes but a single day. This difficulty can only add to our amazement and admiration as we consider the difficulties that Carroll (and his fellow American priests) had in caring for his enormous diocese.
- We see the beginning of the remarkable friendship between Carroll and Benjamin Franklin, preparing us for the circumstances under which Carroll was chosen as the United States' first bishop.
- We are also made to consider the strange situation of the Catholic patriots, often despised by their neighbors and treated as second-class citizens. At this point in the book, Catholics had no guarantee that the independence they worked for would necessarily improve their lot, given all the anti-Catholic feeling and rhetoric heard in so many of the colonies. Their belief in the American cause and their perseverance in the face of prejudice is something to marvel at.

The remainder of *Priest, Patriot and Leader* introduces us to many pivotal players in the development of the Catholic Church in America. Father Farmer, Prince Gallitzin, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Father Jean-Louis Cheverus and many others deserve biographies of their own for the parts they played in our history. Under Bishop Carroll's guidance, these individuals took on huge tasks in vast territories, often with little money and always facing dangers of one kind or another. We, in our comfortable homes and with easy access to the sacraments, can hardly imagine what they endured, but can be grateful that they succeeded so well. Their faith, along with their appreciation for political liberty, should inspire us to follow their example in whatever small way we can.

In chapter three we read a dialogue about slavery between Fr. Carroll and his sister, Mary, no doubt created by the author to give readers an idea of typical colonial opinions at the time. Readers may be disappointed at this conversation—wanting Fr. Carroll, the “hero” of this story to express stronger opinions against slavery than merely a tepid apprehension that slavery will become a “grave problem to America.” By way of explanation, keep in mind that at the time of this fictional conversation, Maryland colonial law forbade its citizens from freeing slaves. This

law was not changed until 1796. The best they could do with their slaves (who were inherited from their forbears) was treat them humanely, which Carroll did. Sources state that Bishop Carroll had two black servants—one free and one a slave; the latter was given his freedom in Carroll's will, along with a generous inheritance. (This was probably the elderly "Willie" in our story.) Carroll believed in gradual emancipation of slaves, rather than sudden and total abolition. He felt that freeing all slaves at once, without also providing them the means to survive and obtain employment, would be unjust to the slaves. Carroll's actions put those beliefs into effect. Perhaps this was the best that could be done by an individual slave owner at that time.

At the level of the Universal Church, however, it should be noted that from 1435 onward the Holy See issued periodic condemnations of slavery as practiced by European settlers, first in the Canary Islands and then later in the New World. An English translation of some of these papal documents can be accessed online: *Sicut Dudum* by Pope Eugene IV, 1435; *Sublimus Dei* by Pope Paul III, 1537; and *In Supremo Apostolatus* by Pope Gregory XVI, 1839.