


**IF HEAVEN BE
YOUR DESTINY!**
The World of American Catholicism 1945 - 1965

IMAGES AND ARTIFACTS FROM THE
JOHN J. BURNS LIBRARY
LITURGY AND LIFE COLLECTION

Boston College
Theology and Ministry Library
Atrium Gallery

April 1 - June 1, 2014
Reception Tuesday, April 1 at 4pm

Sponsored by the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
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A CATALOG OF EXHIBITED MATERIALS

INTRODUCTION

The two decades before the Second Vatican Council (1945-65) represent the last flowering of American Catholicism as a “mini-state” within mainstream U. S. culture. In the decades after 1840, the colonial Anglo-American Catholic community of the eastern shore of 17th and 18th century Maryland became overwhelmed by tides of Catholic immigrants -- first from Ireland, then from Germany, Italy, Poland, and Eastern Europe. To the extent that the “immigrants became the church” (in the famous words of Jesuit historian James Hennessey), American Catholicism between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries can be regarded as an alternative religious world to the still overwhelmingly Protestant U.S. religious culture.

Though by the end of World War II American Catholicism continued to be set apart by the immigrant sense of standing outside the larger culture, a number of social, economic, and educational factors (such as the GI Bill of 1945) were beginning to dismantle the comforting if confining Catholic “ghetto” communities of North America.

The promulgation of Vatican II decrees in the years after the close of the Council in 1965 engendered something akin to a revolution in Catholic piety, worship, and self-understanding – a revolution so dramatic that, for Catholics born after the Council, the erstwhile world of American Catholicism seemed like a foreign culture, or at least a religious culture markedly different from the tradition in which they were raised.

This exhibit, drawn from the rich resources of the John J. Burns Library *Liturgy and Life* collection, seeks to introduce younger Catholics and others to a world of religious piety and worship now lost, or at least less familiar than the one that has defined the U.S. Catholic community of the past half century.

The artifacts and images chosen for inclusion all witness – in different ways – to the pre-Vatican II sense of U.S. Catholicism that “we grew up different” (Wills) from other Americans—if only because almost all U.S. Catholics believed that heaven was their destiny in a privileged sense denied even to other Christians.

“[The] Catholicism that shaped the lives and memories of millions of children in the 1940s and 1950s was first experienced as ‘a vast set of intermeshed habits’ (Wills) that *was* the American world of religion. And the habits and memories of childhood... are tenacious: ‘heads ducked in unison, crossings, chants, beads, incense...’ (Wills). Indeed, this American Catholic world was a *total experience* not unlike being Amish in Pennsylvania or Mormon in Utah, but stretching coast to coast....” (Massa)

This sense of “differentness” can be glimpsed in the way that everyday household items might be utilized for distinctive Catholic purposes such as a plant-holder with the face of the Virgin Mary or a Sacred Heart light switch plate. Often the home was itself a site of Catholic piety. Holy water fonts were placed next to bedroom doors to end the day with a sacramental reminder; Lenten offering banks collected coins from children to remind them at home of their sacred duty to “spread the faith” all over the world; scapulars (abbreviated versions of the habits worn by nuns and monks) were worn around the neck every day to remind believers of their duty

of self-denial; and Extreme Unction kits were close at hand in case of sudden encounters with sickness and death.

It is the hope of the many hearts, minds, and hands involved in shaping this exhibit that the artifacts and images presented here will enable viewers not only to experience and better understand the "lost world" of American Catholicism between 1945 and 1965, but also to gain a deeper appreciation of the rich past of Catholic piety and practice that shapes our own sense of Church and community today.

Sources cited:

Massa, Mark Stephen. *The American Catholic Revolution: How the Sixties Changed the Church Forever*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Wills, Garry. *Bare Ruined Choirs: Doubt, Prophecy, and Radical Religion*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972.

EXHIBITED ARTIFACTS

- 1. Sick Call Set** A velvet-lined box containing all the items that would be needed by a priest when visiting a sick or dying parishioner at home. As death neared, family members were encouraged to call for a priest to give a final anointing and blessing that would prepare the departing soul to meet God in the afterlife.
- 2. Monstrance** A piece of liturgical hardware associated with devotion to the Eucharist outside of Mass. The central glass piece, known as a "lunette," held a consecrated Communion wafer. Since Catholics believed that, in the Mass, the bread had been transformed into the very body of Christ, when they prayed before a monstrance, displayed on the altar, they were praying literally in the presence of God. The monstrance might also be used to bless a congregation during a special prayer service known as Benediction.
- 3. Statuette: Infant Jesus of Prague** One of the most popular religious statues in the American Catholic home for generations. A larger version of this statue had originally been dedicated by a princess at a church in the city of Prague in 1628, and smaller representations spread rapidly thereafter. In many cases, the owner kept interchangeable sets of clothing for the statue, which could be changed according to the color of the liturgical season of the church year.
- 4. Lourdes Holy Water Bottle** A bottle that could be used for water from the shrine at Lourdes, France. In 1858, Bernadette Soubirous, a peasant girl, reported seeing repeated apparitions of the Virgin Mary there. A spring appeared, and miraculous healing powers were attributed to its water. Catholics from all over the world visited Lourdes (and still do) in hopes of cure from various ailments, and some religious orders also undertook to provide the water to those who could not travel there. This bottle was used for that

purpose by priests of the Oblate order in Texas.

5. **Fatima Holy Water Bottle** A bottle that could be used by a visitor to the shrine at Fatima, Portugal, to bring home some of the water from that site, believed to be miraculous. In 1917, three peasant children reported seeing a vision of the Virgin Mary there, later returning to the site for repeated apparitions and conversations with her over several months. Devotion to Our Lady of Fatima became a popular devotion among Catholics, with its prayers often devoted specifically to the conversion of Communist Russia.
6. **Miraculous Medal Holy Water Bottle and Stand** This bottle combined two popular devotions: holy water used in the home and the Miraculous Medal. The Medal had its origins with apparitions of the Virgin Mary in France in 1830 and was believed to have miraculous healing powers.
7. **Lenten Offering Tin** Catholics were encouraged to make small sacrifices during the season of Lent, the 40-day penitential period before the celebration of Easter. They might give up things they enjoyed – for children candy, perhaps; for adults alcohol. This tin could be used to save coins or loose change every day, with the total sum given to a worthy religious cause at the end of Lent. Note the checks for days on the sides, so that the user could be sure each day's sacrifice had been made.
8. **Polish Sacred Heart Ribbon** Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was one of the most popular lay devotions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Emphasizing the love of Jesus for his people, it gave rise to a host of prayers and parish societies. The devotion had been particularly vigorous in Poland, and immigrants from that country brought it to America with them. This is a ribbon from a Sacred Heart devotional society at a Polish parish in Grand Rapids, Michigan.
9. **Knights of the Cross Pin** Before the 1960s, only the altar boys assisting the priest at Mass said any of the responsive prayers aloud. As a way of building esprit de corps among these school-age boys (girls were not allowed until later), they were often designated "Knights of the Altar." They could wear a pin such as this as a way of showing off their rank to their schoolmates
10. **My Outdoor Companion** This medal could be carried by an individual Catholic, and it combined four devotions in one. It depicts the Sacred Heart of Jesus, St. Peter, St. Christopher, and St. Hubert – variously the patrons for travelers, fishermen, and hunters. The back of the medal contains important information for anyone finding it if its owner had suffered an accident in any those activities: the request that a priest be called to give the anointing before death.
11. **Sacred Heart Light Switch Plate** A means for consecrating the family home to the Sacred Heart. Devotees believed that any home in which the Sacred Heart was displayed would receive special protection and blessings.

- 12. Award Ribbon, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine** The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (known familiarly to Catholics everywhere as “CCD”) was the program of catechism and religious instruction in local parish churches for school children, from elementary school through high school. It was especially intended for those students who attended the local public schools, rather than the parish’s own schools
- 13. Badge of the Blessed Mother of Sorrows** In giving the Virgin Mary the title of Mother of Sorrows, Catholics emphasized the trials of her life, especially the crucifixion of her son, Jesus. In the twentieth century, this somber devotion became part of a broad-based Catholic campaign of prayer to combat communism.
- 14. Sacred Heart Auto League Insignia** A nametag and sign of membership in the Sacred Heart Auto League, probably intended to be mounted on the dashboard of the family car. Membership offered protection while traveling and, perhaps, a reminder of courteous and safe driving.
- 15. Holy Water Font** For home use; presents the child Jesus embracing the world.
- 16. Holy Water Font** For home use; presents the Virgin Mary standing against a shell, a traditional artistic depiction. Holy water might be used in blessing both before and after personal or family prayer.
- 17. Blessed Virgin Mary Planter** This ceramic object did double duty. It could hold and display a house plant, but it was also an object of devotion.
- 18. Bust of the Blessed Virgin Mary** Intended for display in a private home.
- 19. Miraculous Medal Holy Water Font** For home use, combining the receptacle for holy water with the Miraculous Medal devotion.
- 20. St. Christopher Medallion and Name Tag** St. Christopher was the patron saint of travelers, a title that derived from an ancient story. Assigned to help Christian pilgrims ford a river, Christopher himself nearly drowned while carrying an infant across the raging stream; the infant turned out to be Jesus himself. This medal and name tag were carried by their owner to invoke Christopher’s protection during their own travels.
- 21. Scapular of the Passion** A badge worn by members of the order of Passionist priests. Passionists conducted retreats and revival missions in American Catholic parishes.
- 22. Statuette: Bishop Blessing a Child** A variety of small statuettes were designed and sold to decorate the Catholic home. This one, depicting a bishop – recognizable by his mitre (the pointed hat) and crozier (the staff he holds) – may have been a memento of a child’s receiving the sacrament of Confirmation. That would have been one of the few times that an ordinary Catholic child would have encountered a bishop.
- 23. Pontifical Gloves** A pair of gloves to be worn by the celebrant during parts of a High

Mass. The “IHS” device, a commonplace in Christian art, is a compression of the Greek word for Jesus.

- 24. Biretta** A hat worn by the clergy during liturgical and other functions. The purple color of the trim indicates that this would have been worn by a priest holding the honorific title of Monsignor.
- 25. Crucifix** Representations of the crucified Christ were common devotional objects in Catholic homes. Some, like this one, depicted the wounds in gory detail. The inscription, INRI, is an abbreviation of the notice which the gospels say was posted on the cross by Pontius Pilate -- Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.
- 26. Statuette: Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Therese of Lisieux** This elaborate piece shows two saints, standing on either side of a holy water font, with another font at their feet. The Virgin Mary, on the left, is shown as Our Lady of Lourdes in the apparition to Bernadette, in which she encouraged recitation of the rosary; she holds a rosary in her prayerful hands. St. Therese, a French nun and mystic of the late nineteenth century, was known as the “Little Flower” and was usually depicted surrounded by roses.
- 27. Crucifix** Representation of the crucified Christ, this one also showing some of the implements (ladder, hammer, nails, spear) associated with the crucifixion.
- 28. Statuette: Child Jesus** This statuette depicts Jesus as a child. He stands on a globe, symbolizing his authority over the entire world, and he holds a communion wafer, a reminder of his presence in the Eucharist.
- 29. Clapper** Before the reform of the liturgy in the 1960s, the Latin Mass was periodically interrupted by the ringing of small bells by the altar boys. These indicated particularly important parts of the Mass (the elevation of the Eucharistic host, for instance) and served to attract the attention of the congregation, which might not otherwise be able to follow the prayers said by the priest. During Holy Week, the week before Easter in which the suffering and death of Jesus were commemorated, the bells were replaced by this wooden device, which made a harsher sound, thereby underscoring the seriousness of the events being remembered.
- 30. Statuette: St. Francis of Assisi** The simplicity and gentleness of Francis (1181-1226) were widely known and admired. His association with nature was a reminder to Catholics to hold to the simple core of their faith amid the hustle and bustle of modern life.
- 31. Sandals** A pair of violet sandals, worn by the celebrant during a Pontifical High Mass, a particularly elaborate liturgical celebration. These sandals are identified as belonging to Christopher Weldon, the Bishop of Springfield, Massachusetts.
- 32. Stockings** A pair of stockings, worn during the celebration of High Mass.

THE PAMPHLETS

Beginning in the early twentieth century, American Catholicism boasted of a vigorous “print culture.” Magazines, newspapers, prayer books, devotional texts, and other materials – even comic books for children – were widely available, inexpensively priced, and designed for a lay audience. A number of church-related publishing houses specialized in the production of this material, including Our Sunday Visitor, Liguorian, the Queen’s Work, and others. By consulting this plethora of texts, Catholics could deepen their faith, develop their own devotional emphases, and arm themselves for argument with those who criticized the church. Many parish churches had pamphlet racks just inside the front door. From these, a parishioner could select a short treatise on almost any subject related to the faith, usually for 25 cents or less. The racks typically had a small coin slot, into which (on the honor system) the purchaser slipped the cost of the chosen pamphlet. The Liturgy and Life Collection of the Burns Library is one of the largest and best collections of these pamphlets available anywhere.

Liturgical Renewal

For centuries, the Mass and other official ceremonies of the church had been conducted in Latin, a language that was foreign to virtually everyone. This understandably limited active participation by the laity. Early in the twentieth century, however, a Liturgical Movement took shape. Centered mostly in the Midwest, this movement sought to promote lay understanding of the meaning of Mass and the sacraments, an understanding that would lead to more thoughtful and eager participation. The work of the Second Vatican Council mandated dramatic changes in the form of Mass – most notably, its translation into the vernacular – a series of changes that first went into effect in November 1964 and continued for several years thereafter. While some worried that the “New Mass” diminished the piety with which parishioners fulfilled their religious duties, most American Catholics embraced the changes enthusiastically.

Mary

Few doctrines divided Catholics from other Christians more decisively than their devotion to the Virgin Mary. In America, the forms of Marian devotion were diverse and widely popular with Catholics young and old, male and female, and from all walks of life. Catholics believed Mary to be a particularly influential intercessor with her son, and thus prayer to Mary was seen as being especially powerful and effective.

Heaven, Hell, Purgatory

Catholic preachers regularly encouraged their hearers to remember the “Last Things” – their ultimate fate in the next world after their sojourn in this one. The possibilities were clear: reward and union with God (Heaven); damnation and eternal separation from God (Hell); or a temporary, intermediate state where they would undergo a final cleansing of their sins before going to heaven (Purgatory). Though no one in this world could know exactly what these states consisted of, hundreds of descriptions were available, urging individual Catholics to live their lives in such a way as to merit one rather than the other. Particular attention was given to Purgatory, since most non-Catholic Christians rejected that traditional doctrine.

Eucharistic Adoration

Catholics were encouraged to engage in many forms of prayer involving the Eucharist apart from Mass, based on their belief in the Real Presence. Jesus was “really present” in the bread and wine that were consecrated at Mass, and thus prayer done in proximity to these Eucharistic elements was especially meaningful and potent. Sometimes, it might consist of simple adoration of God, beyond any specific prayers. Catholics could undertake the practice at any time, but some made a special point of staying up all night to do so – in a sense, holding night watch with Jesus. This was considered a form of “heroic virtue” that might bring greater spiritual benefit precisely because it was difficult. These pamphlets offered guidance to those who wanted to engage in such adoration, whether in church or (by extension) in their own homes.

Holy Hours

The Holy Hour was a common devotion in American Catholic parishes, usually consisting of silent prayer and reflection, a brief exhortation from a priest, and Benediction, the blessing of the assembled congregation with a Eucharistic host displayed in a monstrance. A form of the Holy Hour (without the Eucharistic dimension) could also be done at home by a family and, as one of these pamphlets demonstrates, might even be reduced to half an hour for those who were especially busy.

Sexual Morality

Catholic teaching of morality was built on the presumption that the church should help form the standards for acceptable and unacceptable sexual behavior. While questions of this kind eventually came to focus on such issues as homosexuality and abortion, earlier in the twentieth century the church was more concerned with personal purity and how it could be maintained, offering advice on how to guard against impure thoughts and the actions that might come from them.

Catholic Action

Beginning in the 1930s, encouraged by papal statements, the concept of Catholic Action spread widely. The movement was defined broadly as the active participation of lay people in the apostleship and work of the clergy and hierarchy. Catholics were encouraged to live out their faith not merely by attending to their religious obligations, but also by applying its principles to the affairs of everyday life. Religion was not just a Sunday kind of thing; it should also be a Tuesday or a Saturday thing. Parish-based Catholic Action groups were organized as small “cells,” in which the members would study church teachings (on questions of social justice, for instance) and then try to apply them in their own communities.

Sex Education

Throughout most of the twentieth century, any public discussion of sex among Catholics was guarded and demure. Priests were usually reluctant to discuss such matters from the pulpit and, for most lay Catholics, that was just fine. Forming proper attitudes toward sexuality, especially in young people, was always important, however, and the task often fell to pamphlets that could be studied in families or in other small group settings.

FROM THE CURATORS:

We offer our sincere thanks to the following people whose help, expertise, and support has been indispensable to the creation of this exhibit:

- Shelly Barber, *John J. Burns Library Reference and Archives Specialist* for carefully retrieving and organizing for viewing in the Burns Reading Room all of the items we wished to examine for inclusion in the exhibit.
- Amy Braitsch, *John J. Burns Library Archivist* for her general guidance in navigating the particularities of the Archives.
- Adeane Bregman, *Head Librarian Bapst Library* for lending us two glass display cases from the Bapst.
- Bridget Burke, *Associate University Librarian for Digital Initiatives and Public Programs* for incubating the idea of this exhibit, showing us the way forward with it, and helping with the logistics of the display.
- Lyn Goode, *Boston College Libraries Manager Business and Administrative Services* for arranging the delivery of the display cases from Bapst Library to the Theology and Ministry Library.
- Barbara Adams Hebard, *John J. Burns Library Conservator* for her expert help in determining the readiness of the items for exhibit and for assuring their safe packing for transit to the Theology and Ministry Library.
- Andrew Isidoro, *John J. Burns Library Assistant* for his patient assistance in the Burns Reading Room while we examined and chose items for the exhibit, and for assisting with the exhibit installation.
- James O'Toole, *Professor and Clough Millennium Chair in History* for his expert writing of all of the label text and pamphlet descriptions, and for his presentation at the exhibit opening.
- Justine Sundaram, *John J. Burns Library Senior Reference Librarian/Bibliographer, Special Collections* for her gracious hospitality in the Burns Reading Room.
- Kevin Tringale, *Boston College Libraries Exhibit Specialist/Senior Library Assistant* for his generous, amiable, creative, ever steady work in planning, advertising, and installing the exhibit.
- Thomas Wall, *University Librarian* for his continued support, enthusiasm for, and affirmation of Theology and Ministry Library Atrium Gallery exhibit initiatives.

--Mark Massa, S.J., Dean, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

--Esther Griswold, Head Librarian, Boston College Theology and Ministry Library