

Nova et Vetera CXXV: 'How Englishmen may become Angels'

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Life was pretty tough for English Catholics in the seventeenth century. Many persevered in their loyalty to the old Faith despite the concomitant dangers while others found refuge in Catholic Europe. But there was another, even bolder option – to cross the Atlantic and establish a utopia where Catholics and Protestants could live together in relative peace.

This was not an option open to many but it was chosen by the wealthy Calvert family. George Calvert, a Yorkshire man, served as Secretary of State to James I and was heavily involved in the (unsuccessful) negotiations to marry the future Charles I to the Spanish Infanta. He resigned in 1625 and became a Catholic. Despite this, he remained in royal favour and was granted the title of First Baron Baltimore. He had long been interested in colonisation, previously having bought shares in the Virginia Company, and now felt inspired to set up his own colony. This would not only further English interests (against stiff foreign competition) and promise healthy profits but also gave the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel to the indigenous peoples and promote the liberty of his co-religionists. Calvert subsequently received a grant of land in Newfoundland, now on the eastern coast of Canada, and founded the Province of Avalon, named after the mythical place so closely associated with Joseph of Arimathea and King Arthur.

However, the Newfoundland winters were thought rather harsh by the Yorkshire man and he sought another colony in warmer climes. Charles I, who had now succeeded to the Throne, approved a grant of land at the northern half of the Chesapeake Bay region although Calvert died shortly before the charter was issued. The new colony was called Maryland (*Terra Mariae*), after Queen Henrietta Maria. The arrangements in the charter suited all parties. The King could extend his territories without any direct expense or effort and in return received a fifth of all gold and silver, as well as the gift of two Native American arrows each Easter. Calvert, on the other hand, could make huge profits and exercise extensive powers, including the collection of taxes and the waging of war.

It was the responsibility of Calvert's son, Cecilius, to get Maryland established. He sent an expedition, including his younger brother Leonard and two Jesuit priests. *The Ark* and the *The Dove* duly arrived in Maryland in March 1634. We are told that they made a cross out of a large tree and 'at the place prepared, we all kneeled down, and said certain Prayers, taking possession of this Country for our Saviour and for our Sovereign Lord the King of England.' After several weeks of exploration, the 140 colonists settled at a site they named St Mary's City. Inspired by his father and his own experiences of religious strife in England, Calvert incorporated two

revolutionary ideas as principles of the new colony: liberty of conscience in matters of religion and a policy of no established religion, effectively a separation of church and state. All Christians and Jews were allowed to practice their faith and build places of worship without interference.

The Jesuits were heavily involved in Maryland from the start, ministering not only to the colonists but the local Algonquian Indians. The head of the Mission was Fr Andrew White, the 'Apostle of Maryland', who was born in London in 1579 and had studied at the English Colleges in Douai and Valladolid. He was captured in England shortly after his ordination in 1603 and later became a Jesuit. Accompanying the first colonists to Maryland, he had the privilege of celebrating the first Mass in English America on 25 March 1634. He composed a grammar, dictionary and catechism in the local Algonquian dialect and famously baptised Chitomachon, the chief of the Piscataway Indians, taking the name of 'Charles'. wrote one of the most important accounts of the early years of the colony. He also produced a promotional tract, *A Declaration of the Lord Baltemore's Plantation in Maryland*. The only surviving original copy was kept in the Archive of the Archdiocese of Westminster and copied in the 1920s - just as well since it subsequently disappeared!

White only stayed eleven years in the New World. It is often forgotten that the Civil Wars affected the English colonies in America. The Calverts were staunch royalists and Richard Ingle, a Parliamentarian tobacco trader, invaded Maryland in 1644. White was transported back to England in chains the following year and remained in Newgate until January 1648. Although he hoped to return to his beloved Maryland, he died in England eight years later.

The Jesuits built a wooden Catholic church in St Mary's City in 1635. This was destroyed during Ingle's invasion but after Charles II's Restoration, when the Calvert family returned to Maryland, a more substantial church was erected, the first all-brick structure in the colony and, in fact, the first major Catholic church erected in English America. Such a building could never have been legally constructed elsewhere in the English-speaking world at the time.

Sadly this chapel only served the Catholic community for less than four decades. The so-called 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 sparked off a rebellion in Maryland and the Calverts lost control of the colony. It came directly under royal control. Initially the tradition of religious tolerance was continued although the Church of England was established as the official religion in 1692 (going against one of Calvert's central principles). Freedom to worship ended for Catholics in 1704, when the 'Act to Prevent the Growth of Popery' was passed and the chapel at St Mary's was ordered to be locked up. A decade or so later, the Jesuits demolished the structure and took away nearly all of its above ground elements for re-use. Its ruins and a surrounding

cemetery were completely obliterated by farmers converting the land to agriculture in the 1750s.

The legacy left by the Calverts and priests like Andrew White was far-reaching. Maryland represents the beginning of the Catholic Church in America. Although there were some earlier Spanish and French Catholic churches, the erection of the chapel at St Mary's City was a true landmark and it is appropriate that America's first diocese was that of Baltimore, with John Carroll as its first bishop (consecrated at Lulworth Castle). Catholics remained in the area throughout, even in spite of persecution in the eighteenth century, and Carroll himself descended from one of the original colonists.

In recent years the 1667 Brick Chapel, 'the founding place of the Roman Catholic Church in English America', has been rebuilt, following decades of painstaking archaeological investigation. On 20 September 2009 the reconstructed chapel was ceremoniously 'unlocked' for the first time since 1704. Archbishop Wuerl (as he was then) referred on this occasion to the chapel as 'a visible, tangible testimony to an inalienable right – our inherent human right to religious liberty and the blessing of freedom of conscience... The celebration of the unlocking of the Brick Chapel is the recognition of the place of values – moral, ethical and religious – in the life and in the society of which we are a formative part.'

The Maryland experiment was remarkable, especially given the context of the times. As Fr White wrote, it showed 'how Englishmen may become Angels, the King's Dominions be extended and the adventurers attend Land and Gear' - in that order of importance.