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Blast From the Past: Archbishop John Carroll

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Distinctly Catholic

Monsignor John Tracy Ellis, from whom we quoted yesterday on Cardinal Gibbons, also provided a fine account of America's first bishop, John Carroll, and specifically his aversion to political involvement. Ellis's prose-style is unequalled and happy is the bishop who warrants comparison to John Carroll.

Among the many wise precedents set by this extraordinary man John Carroll, few proved of greater public benefit than his insistence that the Catholic clergy should hold themselves aloof from politics. We have already seen his reluctance to join the Continental Congress's commission to Canada in 1776 lest this political action should endanger his priestly office, for, as he said, when ministers of religion leave their professional duties for the realm of politics, they generally fall into contempt, and sometimes even bring discredit to the cause in whose service they are engaged. Archbishop Carroll followed that principle all through life, and his policy made a lasting impression on the Catholic clergymen of his own day and on those who followed. When, for example, the Protestant pulpits rang with denunciations of Jefferson in the campaign of 1800, there was no corresponding echo from Carroll and his priests. Good Federalists as most of these clergymen probably were in their conservative sympathies, there was no public pronouncement to lend Catholic sanction to John Adams and his friends.

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