



Democracy in America
Alexis de Tocqueville (1835)

Alexis de Tocqueville was a white French politician who spent several months in 1831-32 touring the United States; he later published his observations of US society in a classic work, Democracy in America. In the passage below, Tocqueville argues that Catholics in the United States are not hostile to democracy, contrary to the anxious perceptions of many American Protestants. Those perceptions were fueled partly by 19th-century political struggles in Europe, but they also had a genealogy going back to the Protestant Reformation and to European colonization of the Americas, when English Protestants viewed Catholics as tyrannical enemies.

The passage concludes with a report of a prayer that Tocqueville heard delivered at a rally in Boston. The rally was held to support an uprising in eastern Europe, where Polish nationalists were fighting for independence from the Russian empire. (In the month following the rally, Russia defeated the uprising, which lacked support from any major European government. Poland would not become independent until after World War I.) From an account of the same rally written by Tocqueville's travel companion, Gustave de Beaumont, it appears that the "priest" (French prêtre) whose prayer Tocqueville recounts here was Lyman Beecher, an ordained Presbyterian then serving as the minister of a Congregational church. Ironically, Beecher was a prominent promoter of the image of American Catholics as anti-democratic—the image that Tocqueville sought to dispel.

I think that the Catholic religion has erroneously been regarded as the natural enemy of democracy. Amongst the various sects of Christians, Catholicism seems to me, on the contrary, to be one of the most favorable to equality of condition among men. In the Catholic Church, the religious community is composed of only two elements: the priest and the people. The priest alone rises above the rank of his flock, and all below him are equal.

On doctrinal points, the Catholic faith places all human capacities upon the same level. It subjects the wise and the ignorant, the man of genius and the vulgar crowd, to the details of the same creed. It imposes the same observances upon the rich and the needy; it inflicts the same austerities upon the strong and the weak. It listens to no compromise with mortal man, but, reducing all the human race to the same standard, it confounds all the distinctions of society at the foot of the same altar, even as they are confounded in the sight of God. If Catholicism predisposes the faithful to obedience, it certainly does not prepare them for inequality; but the contrary may be said of Protestantism, which generally tends to make men independent more than to render them equal. Catholicism is like an absolute monarchy: if the sovereign be removed, all the other classes of society are more equal than in republics.

It has not unfrequently occurred that the Catholic priest has left the service of the altar to mix with the governing powers of society and to take his place amongst the civil ranks of men. This religious influence has sometimes been used to secure the duration of that political state of things to which he belonged. Thus we have seen Catholics taking the side of aristocracy from a religious motive. But no sooner is the priesthood entirely separated from the government, as is the case in the United States, than it is found that no class of men are more naturally disposed than the Catholics to transfer the doctrine of the equality of condition into the political world.

If, then, the Catholic citizens of the United States are not forcibly led by the nature of their tenets to adopt democratic and republican principles, at least they are not necessarily opposed to them; and their social position, as well as their limited number, obliges them to adopt these positions. Most of the Catholics are poor, and they have no chance of taking a part in the government unless it be open to all the citizens. They constitute a minority, and all rights must be respected in order to ensure to them the free exercise of their own privileges. These two causes induce them, even unconsciously, to adopt political doctrines which they would perhaps support with less zeal if they were rich and preponderant.

The Catholic clergy of the United States have never attempted to oppose this political tendency, but they seek, rather, to justify it. The Catholic priests in America have divided the intellectual world into two parts: in the one, they place the doctrines of revealed religion, which they assent to without discussion; in the other, they leave those political truths which they believe the Deity has left open to free inquiry. Thus the Catholics of the United States are, at the same time, the most submissive believers and the most independent citizens.

It may be asserted, then, that in the United States, no religious doctrine displays the slightest hostility to democratic and republican institutions. The clergy of all the different sects there hold the same language; their opinions are in agreement with the laws, and the human mind flows onwards, so to speak, in one undivided current.

I happened to be staying in one of the largest cities in the Union, when I was invited to attend a public meeting in favor of the Poles and of sending them supplies of arms and money. I found two or three thousand persons collected in a vast hall which had been prepared to receive them. In a short time, a priest in his ecclesiastical robes advanced to the front of the platform; the spectators rose and stood uncovered in silence whilst he spoke in the following terms:

“Almighty God! the God of armies! Thou who didst strengthen the hearts and guide the arms of our fathers when they were fighting for the sacred rights of their national independence! Thou who didst make them triumph over a hateful oppression and hast granted to our people the benefits of liberty and peace! Turn, O Lord, a favorable eye upon the other hemisphere; pitifully look down upon a heroic nation which is even now struggling as we did in the former time and for the same rights. Thou who didst create man in the same image, let not tyranny mar thy work and establish inequality upon the earth. Almighty God! do thou watch over the destiny of the Poles, and make them worthy to be free. May thy wisdom direct their councils; may thy strength sustain their arms! Shed forth thy terror over their enemies, scatter the powers which take counsel against them, and permit not the injustice which the world has witnessed for fifty years to be consummated in our time. O Lord, who holdest alike the hearts of nations and of men in thy powerful hand, raise up allies to the sacred cause of right; arouse the French nation from the apathy in which its rulers retain it, that it may go forth again to fight for the liberties of the world.

“Lord, turn not thou thy face from us, and grant that we may always be the most religious, as well as the freest, people of the earth. Almighty God, hear our supplications this day. Save the Poles, we beseech thee, in the name of thy well-beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who died upon the cross for the salvation of all men. Amen.”

The whole meeting responded “Amen!” with devotion.

Source: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 3rd. ed., trans. Henry Reeve, rev. Francis Bowen (Cambridge [MA]: Sever & Francis, 1863), 1:384-387 (book 1, chap. 17), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/miun.aew4744.0001.001>. Public domain.

Excerpt edited by John-Charles Duffy. Long sentences broken up for readability. A few instances of *the* inserted for improved parallelism. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation emended in line with modern American conventions. Divine pronouns, selectively capitalized in the source publication, are consistently presented here in lowercase.

This edited excerpt from Tocqueville's book is intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.

See also: Gustave de Beaumont's description of the rally, identifying Lyman Beecher as the praying minister, is quoted (in English translation) in George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), 357-358.



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