

BOOK REVIEW

Georgetown's Second Founder: Fr. Giovanni Grassi's News on the Present Condition of the Republic of the United States of North America.

Translated by Roberto Severino. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021.

Michael T. Rizzi, Ed.D.

At some point in their high school or college careers, most students of American history read Alexis de Tocqueville's 1835 masterpiece, *Democracy in America*. Part travel diary and part political philosophy, the book is full of Tocqueville's sharp observations from his journeys across the antebellum United States, and remains one of our best sources of information about American life and culture during that time.

A full eighteen years before *Democracy in America* went to press, however, an Italian Jesuit beat Tocqueville to the punch. Father Giovanni Grassi, SJ came to the United States as a missionary in 1810, and from 1812-1817 served as the ninth president of Georgetown University, then one of only three functioning Catholic colleges in the country. Shortly after his return to Italy in 1817, he wrote a fascinating account of his experiences in America, largely to satisfy Italians' curiosity about that "powerful and vast empire...rising across the Atlantic" (p. 1).

Grassi's work is no less poignant than Tocqueville's, but has languished in obscurity on this side of the Atlantic for more than two centuries simply because it had never been translated into English. Fortunately for students of early American Catholic history, that omission is now corrected. Roberto Severino, a professor emeritus of Italian at Georgetown, has finally made Grassi's book accessible to American audiences with a sharp and readable translation published in 2021 by Georgetown University Press.

The book provides a rare and welcome Catholic perspective on early American history, full of observations about life in the United States as seen through the eyes of the country's earliest Italian immigrants, Irish laborers, and others who are often overlooked in conventional textbooks. Grassi traveled extensively throughout the country, but his position at Georgetown gave him a unique perch from which to observe all aspects of American society, from the Protestant ruling class that dominated the federal government to the working-class Italian stone masons who were then helping to build the United States Capitol. He interacted with Native American ambassadors who visited Washington, DC and the slaves owned by many Catholic families, priests, and nuns in Maryland.

Some aspects of American culture offended Grassi's European sensibilities. He was taken aback by the laxity with which Americans viewed their religious commitments and the frequency with which they switched denominations. He found it scandalous that some Americans attended different churches every Sunday, or even chose churches based on the wealth of the congregations and the business networking opportunities they provided. How-

ever, he also saw great potential for the Catholic Church (which then consisted of only five dioceses: Baltimore, Bardstown [that is, Louisville], Boston, Philadelphia, and New York) to thrive and gain converts in the religiously tolerant atmosphere

Of particular interest to readers of *Gathered Fragments* are Grassi's observations about Pennsylvania and Catholicism on the American frontier. As he explains the workings of the American

economy to his Italian readers, Grassi points out that Pittsburgh used to be the starting point for shipping goods west, but thanks to the Louisiana Purchase, Americans could now ship from New Orleans and St. Louis much more cheaply. He also explains that the Diocese of Philadelphia (which included all of Pennsylvania at the time) contained a total of 13 priests. The entire Catholic infrastructure of the state consisted of four parishes in Philadelphia, a handful of mission churches in places like Conewago and Lancaster that were overwhelmingly German in character, and the distant mission outpost at Loretto. Grassi gives special praise to Demetrius Gallitzin, the Russian priest who founded Loretto and forged Catholicism's first foothold in Western Pennsylvania. Like many missionaries of his day, however, Grassi sees the greatest potential for frontier

Catholicism not in western Pennsylvania, but in Kentucky, where many Maryland Catholic families were resettling as part of the push west.

Grassi also describes the various Protestant denominations and sects that he encountered in America, not always favorably. As an example of the dangers of "arbitrary interpretation of Sacred Scripture," (p. 38), he makes a passing reference to the Harmony Society (which would eventually settle in Western Pennsylvania at what is today known as Old Economy Village). He criticizes the Harmonists for their insistence on universal celibacy, which did in fact lead to their extinction over time. He also identifies the Dunkers of Pennsylvania as an important Protestant group; that denomination is now the Church of the Brethren and is perhaps best known in western Pennsylvania as the church behind Juniata College in Huntingdon.

Professor Severino has done the country a great service by finally bringing Grassi's words to us after more than 200 years. *Georgetown's Second Founder* is a valuable window into early American culture from the perspective of Americans whose views have often been marginalized, both during that point in history and subsequent tellings of it. Any student of American Catholic history should own this important volume.

