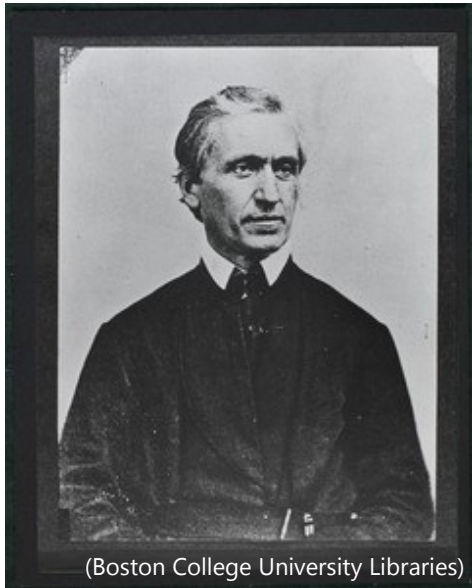


WITNESS TO FREEDOM

FR. JOHN BAPST, SJ



(Boston College University Libraries)

"...if John Bapst, S.J., be found again on Ellsworth soil we will provide for him, and try on an entire suit of new clothes, such as cannot be found at the shops of any tailor, and then when thus appareled he be presented with a free ticket to leave Ellsworth upon the first railroad operation that may go into effect."

Catholics in the United States have a history of challenging our country to a fuller embrace of religious freedom. In the 19th century, violence and persecution posed a significant challenge to newly arrived immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and other parts of Europe. Riots led by anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic nativist parties broke out in cities such as Louisville, Cincinnati, and Philadelphia. It was a time of serious testing for Catholics in this country.

Fr. John Bapst of the Society of Jesus did not want to be sent to the "New World." But his Jesuit superiors had other plans for him, and they sent him to Maine to evangelize the Native Americans. In the town of Ellsworth, where he set up a Catholic parish and school, Fr. Bapst became caught up in a controversy over public schools. During that time, students read aloud from the Bible in school. Fr. Bapst had suggested that Catholic students not be required to read from the King James Version of the Bible, because it was a Protestant translation. After this, Know Nothings attempted to destroy the parish and banned Bapst from Ellsworth.

Bapst was apprehended by a mob. According to some accounts, he was actually pulled out of the confessional. The mob tarred and feathered him, and attempted to set him on fire. He was rescued and eventually cleaned up and brought back to good health. He would go on to become the first president of Boston College. Even so, the event traumatized him, and he suffered flashbacks until the end of his life.

Fr. Bapst did not come to this country as rabble rouser. He is not known to have been a particularly great preacher or confessor or scholar. There is no cause for his canonization. He was a Jesuit priest who answered a call, and it thrust him into a whirlwind of hatred. Religious prejudice is not new. John Bapst, SJ, shows us the courage of an ordinary priest bearing witness to freedom in an extraordinary way.

May the example of Fr. John Bapst inspire each of us to answer our own call, even in the midst of misunderstanding and prejudice.



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