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Why Catholics thrive in the CIA



Robert Vargas

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Just a few days before Christmas 1988, terrorists blew up Pan American Flight 103 as it passed over Lockerbie, not long after leaving Heathrow. One of the 259 murdered onboard was Matthew Gannon. The eighth child of devout Catholic



parents, Gannon had joined the Central Intelligence Agency in 1977, becoming a skilled operations officer and linguist.

Nearly a year later, in October 1989, many victims' belongings still lay unclaimed in trailers in Lockerbie. When Gannon's brother arrived there, he identified his family member's personal items by spotting a missal in a bag with one of Matthew's favourite shirts.

Conspiracy theorists have probably already exploited Gannon's death. It's difficult to investigate anything about the CIA or the Vatican and not encounter narratives that resemble thriller novels.

But we shouldn't ignore the topic. The CIA is the best known of the 17 agencies that comprise the American intelligence community. It has earned itself nicknames like "Catholic Intelligence Agency" and "Catholics In Action". It's worth exploring why.

No official statistics exist on Catholics in the CIA or any other American intelligence agency. But one interesting clue is the relatively high number of Catholics who have served as director of the agency.

The United States is a country in which – with the recent exception of the Supreme Court – Catholics have never dominated the highest offices. Only one out of 44 US Presidents has been Catholic. The first and only Catholic Vice President is the current one, Joe Biden. Before John Kerry, the last Catholic Secretary of State was Alexander Haig, who left the post in 1982. Catholics are a rarity in other top positions



such as Secretary of Defence.

By contrast, three out of the last five CIA directors have been Catholic: Michael Hayden, Leon Panetta, and the current director, John Brennan. Looking back, a number of Catholics led the agency in critical periods during the Cold War. (There were no Catholic directors in the 1990s.)

Some of the most influential directors in CIA history have been Catholic – men such as Walter Bedell Smith, John McCone, William Colby and William Casey. They were not just casual Catholics. They were devout Mass-goers – in many cases, members of groups like the Knights of Malta. The conspiracy theorists usually start there, with nefarious plots about the Vatican steering world affairs. Of course, they never ask why an all-powerful Vatican can't engineer more Catholic presidents.

To make sense of Catholics in the CIA, you have to go back to the 1940s, before the agency even existed. Until that decade, the United States did not have a unified intelligence system. Separate branches of the military collected and analysed their own intelligence.

That changed with the Office of Strategic Services. This was the CIA's predecessor, responsible for espionage and sabotage operations during World War II. The OSS was founded and led by General William J Donovan, whom history knows as "Wild Bill".

Donovan was born into a poor Irish Catholic family in upstate New York. He experimented with other denominations while a



student at Columbia University, though he remained devoted to Catholicism, even after marrying into a rich Protestant family. After heroic combat in World War I he made a fortune as a Wall Street lawyer.

Wild Bill did not exclusively recruit Catholics; he sought anyone with ability. The OSS attracted many kinds of people, including Wasps who sought a more adventurous role in the war.

But many Catholics ended up in the OSS. It's impossible to know for certain why this happened. Was it simply that Wild Bill recruited from his own social circle, which probably included more Catholics than if he had been a Presbyterian?

One telling fact is that the OSS used its Foreign Nationalities branch, based in New York, to recruit from American ethnic groups. At this time in American history, Catholics were well represented among immigrants – Italians, Irish, Poles, Bavarian Germans and many Slavs.

Another historical fact is even more significant: Catholic anti-communism in the 1940s and 1950s was at its zenith. Major Catholic organisations such as the Knights of Columbus supported Senator Joseph McCarthy (himself a Catholic) in his quest to purge the US of communist influence. Were young Catholics inspired to take a more activist role in fighting the godless Soviets?

Near the middle of the 20th century, establishment Protestants still treated Catholics with suspicion. Donovan would have been attorney general in Herbert Hoover's administration had



anti-Catholic sentiment not kept him from it. Catholics were more likely to be trusted and accepted within Donovan's OSS than in other government agencies.

Today many admire the OSS for its derring-do, but many government figures had only contempt for the agency when it existed. Not only did they spurn its operatives as amateurs; they also resented them for encroaching on others' territory. Critics of the OSS included J Edgar Hoover, the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and an enemy of Donovan's.

In many ways, then, the OSS was a haven for outcasts, making it even more suitable for unfashionable Catholics. From its earliest stages the OSS was involved with the Catholic Church. Surrounded by the Axis powers, the Vatican was an important intelligence source for Donovan and his spy network. Who better to cultivate sources within the Catholic community than Catholics themselves?

Donovan already had extensive contacts within the Church. He was friendly with Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York, a dedicated anti-communist. Cardinal Spellman acted as Donovan's liaison to other Catholics, including an apostolic delegate in Washington who promised intelligence reports from Catholic diplomats in Europe and Japan. Donovan also worked with a Belgian Dominican priest, Fr Felix Morlion, to set up a separate Catholic espionage operation in Europe called Pro Deo. The OSS shut down in 1945, but US intelligence and the Catholic Church remained strongly connected.

The CIA's first priority, after its creation in 1947, was to ensure that the communists lost the Italian elections of April 1948. A



CIA intelligence estimate from that era said that Italy would become a dictatorship if the communists won, and “devout Catholics everywhere would be gravely concerned regarding the safety of the Holy See”.

The CIA spent millions – much of it acquired through shady means, since the agency did not have its own budget – to influence the elections. The money sifted through fronts to prominent Italians and organisations such as Catholic Action. The plan worked. Italy’s Christian Democrats won, keeping the communists out of the new government.

This early cooperation with the Church is likely to have established the Catholic officers’ dominance in the CIA’s covert operations wing. And since those CIA directors with intelligence experience have tended to come from the covert-action side of the business, this could explain Catholics’ frequent appearance in the top spot.

For the next several decades, the CIA continued to develop its relationship with the Church. An important figure in this respect was James Jesus Angleton, the CIA’s legendary counterintelligence expert. Angleton, whose middle name came from his Mexican Catholic mother, had served in Rome for the OSS and remained there as station chief for the CIA. Rome was then one of the most important centres of espionage. Angleton was the CIA’s point man for Vatican affairs, getting information from papal nuncios assigned in hostile countries.

Angleton was forced out of the CIA in the 1970s, a rotten decade for American intelligence. Congressional committees



began investigating the agency over political assassinations and other unsavoury practices.

American liberals, including President Jimmy Carter, were especially squeamish about cloak-and-dagger espionage. In the late 1970s, Carter's CIA director Stansfield Turner gutted the organisation's covert ranks in what became known as "the Halloween Massacre".

How many Catholic Cold Warriors were affected? Since many of the sacked officers were over 40, they had signed up during the golden age of anti-communism and probably included many Catholics. In 1980, one former officer, bearing the telling name Bill O'Brien, considered suing the agency for age discrimination. The last OSS veteran to lead the CIA was Bill Casey, who took control in 1981 after managing Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign.

A dedicated Catholic, Casey had worked with Bill Donovan and sought to drag the CIA out of the doldrums of the previous decade. Casey continued the tradition of working with the Church to fight communism. In line with Reagan's focus on Central America, Casey used Catholics in the region to counter the Nicaraguan Sandinistas and left-wing liberation theology. He often delivered intelligence briefings on Poland and the Soviets to Pope John Paul II.

When the Soviet Union fell, the anti-communism that had inspired so many fell with it. Around 1993, the agency began to downsize, offering older employees as much as £17,000 to retire early.



There have been three Catholic directors since then. Of those, only the current chief, John Brennan, has worked for the agency before leading it. In 2015, he announced that he wanted to change the CIA's structure to prepare it for new threats, especially cyberwarfare.

One can only guess how many Catholics are in the CIA now. The agency keeps changing. But for all we know it's still Catholics In Action.

Robert Vargas is the Catholic Herald's foreign correspondent

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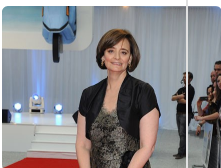
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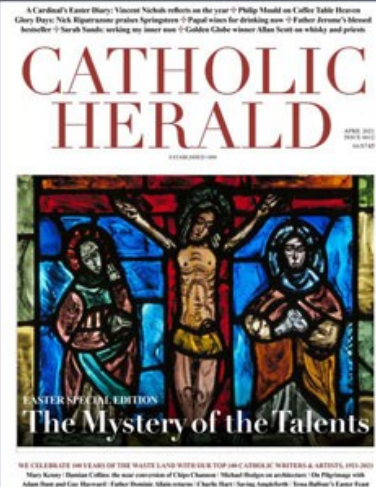
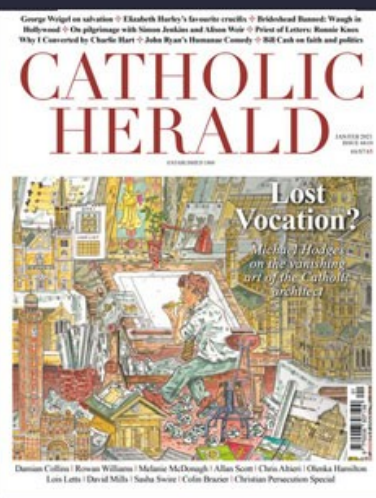
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