



“In truth, we have no lasting home on earth; a Christian’s native country is wherever God calls him.”

Father Samuel Mazzuchelli is well known to most citizens of Southwest Wisconsin, at least to some degree. He was the pioneer catholic missionary to this area and established 13 churches, serving as architect of many of them. He came from Milan, Italy at the age of 22 and was ordained a Dominican priest in 1830, at the age of 24. What most people probably don’t know is that he was also a brilliant writer, philosopher and a man of science. America and the northwest frontier were populated mostly with Protestants, but there was a large minority (about 20%) of Catholic’s on the frontier. These were primarily Irish and German immigrants. Initially Mazzuchelli was a missionary to the Native American’s of the Michigan territory, which included modern day Wisconsin.

After a visit to the lead mining region the faithful of Galena petitioned the Bishop to assign him permanently to this area. He set about building churches in Dubuque and Galena, and afterward many more. He was a man who was able to make friends of both Catholics and Protestants without surrendering his own firmly held beliefs. He had many friends who were Protestant and Protestants participated in the groundbreaking ceremonies for his churches.

Many even contributed financially. As a pioneer Catholic priest, he and his religious beliefs were attacked in the pulpits of several protestant churches, particularly the Presbyterian Church at Mackinac Island, which held a series of forums challenging the beliefs of the Catholic Church and holding its tenets and organization as being inconsistent with a republican form of government. Many Protestants, remembering the wars of the Reformation and Counter Reformation were not inclined to countenance “popish” influence on the frontier. Father Mazzuchelli attended these forums, listened to these speeches, and subsequently made reply in defense of his faith. The fact that religious belief was the occasion for debate and not armed conflict impressed the young Italian priest with the unique character of this new country in regard to religious tolerance. It was the standard in America that everyman could hold his own religious beliefs or establish a new religion without fear of government prohibition or hostility.

Mazzuchelli met with and discussed the beliefs of not only Protestants, but adherents of the new Mormon Church as well. He was able to firmly disagree with his counterparts without incurring hatred. On the frontier, cooperation was essential, and from this imperative our tradition of religious tolerance grew. Tolerance is a disposition to allow freedom of choice and behavior in others despite our sometimes passionate disagreement. It is not a stance of moral relativism requiring acceptance of other beliefs as being equally as valid as your own – the post modernist error that seems to have captured so many in our time. When a protestant church was burned, Father Mazzuchelli wrote: *“I send you \$25.00 as my contribution for rebuilding the church destroyed by fire. My object in so doing is to convince all parties that the Catholic Church does condemn incendiaries (arsonists) under any excuse or pretext political or religious. But by this contribution I do not wish to sanction even individually any religion separated from the unity of the church of God.... all other religions or churches being secessions from the true one.”*¹ This incorporated the concept of tolerance as distinct from acceptance.

In 1843, while at home in Milan on a sabbatical leave, he wrote a book titled: **“Memoirs: historical and edifying, of a missionary apostolic of the order of Saint Dominic among the various Indian tribes and among the Catholics and Protestants of the United States of America”**, a long title in the style of the times. In chapter five of “book two” of this work he explained the nature of religious freedom in America to the European reader. He began by stating: *“The grand truth of an all-seeing God, supreme Judge and Rewarder of good and evil, obliges man as member of a civil society, to keep the law both in private as in public that he may thus receive eternal recompense from the divine lawgiver. Thus does the Religion of Christ serve as a solid foundation to human societies, by sanctifying the laws upon which they rest.”*²

Mazzuchelli initially pointed out that other governments existed that favored certain religions, or lavished favor on all, or prohibited some, but there is but *“one government which while completely without any religious system whatever, is content to protect its subjects in the free practice of their own particular belief, without either adopting or repudiating any one of them by law.”*³ That was the government of the still young United States. *“Now, coming to our subject, it must be noted that at the epoch of the war between the United Colonies of America and England, the people who were fighting for independence were an intermixture of almost every*

European nation and of every religious belief. After independence was secured, the question of Religion seemed to settle itself by each individual's belief in his own right to profess whatever he liked, with fullest liberty; a republican government in its infancy was not in a position either to protect or proscribe any particular form, since it owed the freedom of its existence to the blood shed by its defenders of every creed, and was not empowered to extend any right of inspection over them.”⁴

*“The Constitution of this great Republic was framed by representatives of the people, who all on one plane of equality, were not willing to yield to the laws the very least right over their particular and multiform religious creeds; on the other hand, the design of the Constitution was simply to provide for the well-being of each individual, giving him a guarantee for everything pertaining to him as personal property. The legislators of the United States had in view the establishment in their laws of that **straight line which separates the civil power from conscience**, leaving to this last, all doctrines true or false, with all their present and future consequences, good or bad. In such wise did the various Christian sects, Judaism, indifferentism, unbelief and all the systems which divide the world in religious matters, become neither recognized nor repudiated by law.”*

The novelty of this country and its government was striking to this European born cleric. The thought that the conscience of each person was inviolable gave him pause. He saw where the proliferation of religions with strange and myriad practices could lead to problems in the future: *“Even when religious practices conflict with the laws in a way, if these practices are not in themselves immoral, unjust or detrimental to one's neighbor, they are respected by the laws; for as they concern the conscience alone of the individual, they are held as entirely free of the governing authority.”⁵* If religionists were prosecuted under the law it was for violating good order or the administration of the law, not for the beliefs they held. He saw that the activities of religion and the state were separated by this “line” in order that all faiths would be independent and free of each other. The government was to protect each citizen in his right to believe as he wished, and practice the tenets of his faith free of coercion by the state or others. He understood the duty of the churches was to work together to assure the protection of this most essential freedom: *“So in this government the independence of the civil from the religious official is due to the independence of worship from the civil power, or to express it more concisely, the liberty of one is the liberty of the other.”*

*“There are many who ascribe this state of things to the high standard of the political spirit compared to that of the old world,—of those legislators who framed the Constitution of the United States; and nearly all the citizens of this country pride themselves on being wiser than other nations in their policy regarding Religion. One who has acquired a clear understanding of the singular circumstances attending the Declaration of American Independence will readily see that to these circumstances more than to any others, is due the independence of religious from civil affairs. The many religious sects that were existing in America and were united in the struggle for freeing themselves from the yoke of England, the example of so many bloody wars and persecutions under nearly every government of Europe resulting in these new sects during the past three hundred years; the universal longing for the same liberty in worship as that prized so dearly in civil matters; the impossibility of adopting one sole religion or of forbidding any of them,—these were the moving causes of the **total dissociation** of legislative authority from*

the religious doctrines and modes of worship of the citizens of the great Republic of America. To the same causes is due this day, the continuation of freedom in religious matters. It is to the irresistible force of the circumstances just noted and not to mere human wisdom that the thoughtful observer will attribute this remarkable state of affairs, probably the only example in the world."

"Some have thought that the Government of the United States, because of not recognizing any particular religion must naturally be itself skeptical or atheistic—a most false conclusion in our case, for in one State where the republican system is carried out in full, there can be no laws for direction of worship there, while the citizens are divided on the matter of religion. The very fact that the civil authority is obliged to protect the citizen in the practice of his devotions is the very strongest proof that the majority is religiously inclined, even though by reason of ignorance and error of the people they may be led away to varied and false doctrines. Woe to that country if the mass of its people shall ever become unbelievers!" - A truly brilliant analysis by a man who was far more than a simple parish priest.

When the first legislature of the territory of Wisconsin was held in 1838 Father Mazzuchelli was chosen as its Chaplain. *"It would be difficult to find in the history of any country whatsoever, he marveled, a diplomatic body wherein Protestants outnumbering the Catholics eighteen to one have conferred upon the Minister of the Altar the office of Chaplain. In this case, even if one chooses to take much Religious indifference for granted, yet he must perforce recognize that spirit of impartiality in the organic laws of the Government which severs them completely from religious functions."*

1. From the "Mazzuchelli Bulletin", 1993 issue, Sinsinawa Publications, Sinsinawa, WI.
2. Memoirs page 168
3. Memoirs page 171
4. Memoirs page 172
5. Memoirs page 174