

Will There Be 'Priest Holes' in the U.S.A.?

It was my first encounter with a "priest hole." I had read about that architectural feature of some great English manor houses in history, but I had never seen one.

Recently, my wife and I toured Agecroft Hall in Richmond, Va. It is not a reproduction of an English manor house. It is the very thing.

The wealthy Virginian T.C. Williams had heard of this Lancastershire great family home being auctioned off in the 1920s. The estate's heirs could no longer afford the taxes and the upkeep. And a century of coal mining on the property had undermined this beautiful Tudor house's foundation.

So Mr. Williams had purchased Agecroft Hall and had a major portion of it disassembled and shipped across the Atlantic. On the banks of the meandering James River, he had it rebuilt, half-timber by half-timber.

During our tour of Agecroft Hall, our expert guide pointed out all the distinguishing features of this 500-year-old home. Built in the time of the Tudors, it had survived the depredations of King Henry VIII, the stormy reign of Queen Mary and the dangerous days of Elizabeth's 45-year tenure on the English throne. It had even survived the long and bitter English Civil War of 1641-49.

Our guide pointed to the leather-bound copy of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. This book told the stories of Protestants persecuted under Henry VIII and his daughter, the Catholic monarch whom Protestants called "Bloody Mary." This book was a staple of every great English Protestant family home. And most of the great landed gentry were Protestant then or said they were.

That's where the priest holes come in. Our guide, a young, bearded and most knowledgeable Falstaff of a fellow, noted that it was a capital crime to celebrate Mass in Elizabethan England. Priests were publicly hanged for doing it. Nobles and higher gentry could find their lands and estates confiscated by the Crown for the "crime" of worshipping as Roman Catholics.

So many of the great houses of England, especially in the North Country, were built with hiding places cleverly concealed from searchers. There, they could quickly pack away their clerics and rosaries, vestments, Douay Bibles and even the *prie dieus* on which devout Catholics knelt and prayed.

I was curious. England, for sure, had its priest holes, and Catholics there needed them. Did colonial Virginia? I do know that it was against the law to celebrate Catholic Mass in the Old Dominion during the reigns of England's kings and queens. That's why, for example, I was taught that Virginia Catholics had to go out onto the pier at the port city of Alexandria.

Since Maryland was founded as a Catholic refuge, and since the entire Potomac River belonged to Maryland, Mass could only be celebrated out on those rickety piers. I don't imagine those faithful folks sang, "Shall we gather at the river?" But gather they did.

I'm meeting one of my friends, Frank, again this month. We'll have lunch, and after we break bread together, we'll go to Anne Arundel Medical Center to donate blood. We've made our own little ritual of this. We're almost blood brothers.

My friend Frank is a devout Catholic. I'm a confessional Lutheran. Our deep and abiding friendship is possible in this Home of Freedom because of an American commitment to religious liberty that goes back centuries.

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison understood the essence of this liberty when they together labored to pass the Virginia

Statute for Religious Freedom. For the first time in history, they established not a particular religion, but religious freedom itself. Madison wrote joyfully to Jefferson in France that final passage of the older man's bill would "add to the lustre of our country."

All of this is in grave danger today. Under this administration and under the threat of militant atheizers, our liberty is endangered as it has not been since 1786. President Obama's HHS mandate would force Catholic institutions to violate their consciences and discard the pro-life tenets of their religion.

So, will there be priest holes in America?

Will we see again the kind of religious persecution so many of our forebears came to America to escape?

It was England's King James I, ostensibly a Protestant, who threatened religious dissenters of his day with the heaviest penalties. "They will conform, or I will harry them out of the land."

Is that what Christians in America today are being told?

Bob Morrison is Senior Fellow for Policy Studies at Family Research Council.

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