

Thomas Bray, Priest and Missionary, February 15, 1730

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By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Isaiah 52:7–10; Psalm 102:15–22; Luke 10:1–9

Today we commemorate the life and work of Thomas Bray, a priest of the Church of England. He was born in 1665. At 25, he became rector of a then-rural area, Sheldon, Warwickshire,¹ now surrounded by Birmingham. In 1696, the bishop of London gave him oversight of the church in Maryland. In 1699, he made one missionary visit and returned to England after two and half months. Before I continue with Bray, let me say something about the situation of Christians in the colony of Maryland at the end of the seventeenth century.

In retirement, my mother and stepfather lived in southern Maryland. They were members of Trinity Church, St. Mary's City. The parish was founded in 1638. St. Mary's City was the first capital of the new colony. But it has never been an incorporated town or city. The town disappeared in the eighteenth century after the capital moved to Annapolis in 1694.

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. "Bray, Thomas," 195.

Maryland was founded to be a colony where Roman Catholics and members of the Church of England could live together. In 1649, the colonial legislature enacted an “Act Concerning Religion.” It gave freedom to practice Trinitarian religion.² Saint Mary’s County is the county with its southern border being the Potomac River and its eastern boundary being the Chesapeake Bay. Many Roman Catholic families settled in Saint Mary’s and Charles County, the next county upriver. Unfortunately, 1649 was also the year that King Charles I was executed.

Public worship by Roman Catholics ceased when Cromwell’s officials took over in Maryland. It returned only with the adoption of the Bill of Rights to the constitution of the United States. For the record, the last state to abolish its state church was Massachusetts in 1833.³ Since the adoption of the fourteenth amendment, no state could reestablish a state church.

For the last twenty-four years of Bray’s life, he was rector of St. Botolph Without, Aldgate, London. He was seventy-two when he died on this day in 1730.⁴

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maryland_Toleration_Act, (accessed 15 February 2021).

³ https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=252, (accessed 15 February 2021).

⁴ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2006), 168.

The biographical sketch in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* says, “His understanding of, and concern for, Native Americans and Blacks were far ahead of his time.”⁵

From afar, he took a genuine interest in the work of the church at home and abroad. He founded thirty-nine libraries in the colonies and more than eighty in England. It also remarks that he continued “his efforts on behalf of Black slaves in America.”⁶

Bray is also known for founding institutions that continue their work today, the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel worldwide, wherever they are welcome.

St. Botolph’s parish dates from the year 1108. Its church building, from 1744, survived the bombing of London intact. The parish was an important place for ministry to the poor in the 1970s and 1980s—food, medical care, clothing. The late Father Kenneth Leech was their community theologian. The parish’s website says, “In 1976, the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement was founded at St Botolph’s and through the 1980s and 1990s St Botolph’s was a safe space for

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

those who had been excluded from other churches because of their sexuality.”⁷ It will be on my list to visit the next time we go to London.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁷ <https://www.stbotolphs.org.uk/history/1974-today>, (accessed 15 February 2021).