

ABSTRACT

The Catholic Church is the oldest existing institution in the society. It was brought to Trinidad with the discovery of the Island in 1498. During Spanish rule the Catholic Church was instrumental in opening up new frontiers and organizing the indigenous peoples to a settled way of life. The 1783 Cédula of Rouse de St. Laurent brought a new stream of French Catholic immigrants who dominated the life of the Catholic Church throughout the 19th century. The British capture of the Island in 1797 brought new challenges to the Catholic Church in the form of Protestant groups, but for the time being it continued to receive state-support.

Administrative ties with the bishopric of Spanish Guyana established in 1790 were severed with the creation of a West Indian Vicariate in 1819. Now with its own Bishop, the Catholic Church developed appreciably in the Island. Recruitment of priests from Europe and funds from foreign Catholic Associations enabled the Bishops to secure a Catholic presence throughout the Island, despite the Protestant predispositions of its government. The Catholic Church contributed to modifying to some extent the rigid social structures of the slave-society in its evangelizing and educational activities. This contribution, noticeable during slavery, was more evident in the post-emancipation era.

Because of its association with French cultural values the Catholic Church came into conflict with the colonial government and its anglicising policies. One of the high points of the conflict was the Ecclesiastical Ordinance of 1844 which granted disproportionate state-aid to the Anglican Church. However, the appointment of an Archbishop in 1850 placed the Anglican Church on the defensive.

In its period of expansion, the Catholic Church was not without its internal difficulties. The schism showed the operation of racial prejudices within the Catholic Church and the wider society. Friction also broke out between the English and French-speaking clergy. Nevertheless, on the death of the first Archbishop in 1852 the Catholic Church was still a dominant force.