



# CATHOLIC TEXTBOOK PROJECT

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## 2026 History Essay Contest Homeschool 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Winner

### The History of Tennessee and the Growth of Catholicism in Memphis

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“America at its best is Tennessee,” said former president and Tennessee resident Andrew Jackson. Although its journey to statehood was unique, Tennessee’s Catholic history is what I found most interesting. There are many reasons why I agree with President Jackson's words, but the one that matters most is the strength of the Catholic community across the state.

When Britain was in charge of what is now the United States, no one was allowed to live west of the Appalachian Mountains except for the Native Americans. These Native American groups included the Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Shawnee tribes. When the United States won the Revolutionary War in 1783, North Carolina claimed the land from the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River. The settlers did not get along with the Native Americans, and they were upset that leaders in North Carolina were not protecting them well. The settlers declared their own state which they called “Franklin” (in honor of Benjamin Franklin) for about four years, but it was never formally recognized. Eventually, the government developed clear steps to statehood and the settlers were able to separate as the 16th state, Tennessee, on June 1, 1796.

Before the 1800s, the Catholic Church’s presence in Tennessee was scattered and informal. Any Catholic influence was brought in by French explorers and missionaries who did not remain in the area.

Around the time Tennessee became a state, there were only about 100 Catholics in Tennessee, who had moved there from surrounding stronger Catholic states such as Maryland, Kentucky, and Louisiana. They practiced the faith privately and had little to no access to sacraments. Occasionally, priests would travel by horseback to say Mass in family homes or simple gathering places. On May 10, 1821, the first recorded Catholic Mass in Tennessee was celebrated by Rev. Bishop David and Rev. Fr. Robert Abell. Soon after, Tennessee became a part of the Diocese of Bardstown, KY . The next year, St. Mary's Church was established in Nashville. The Catholic Church in Nashville slowly grew until it created its own diocese in 1836. Two years later, Rev. Richard Pius Miles, a priest from Maryland, officially became the first bishop of Tennessee.

The Diocese of Nashville covered the entire state for almost a century. In the city of Memphis, Father Michael McAleer was appointed pastor of the city's first Catholic church, St. Peter, in the fall of 1840. It became the church home for many Irish and German immigrants. St. Mary's was established in 1862 as a German Catholic parish, to relieve overcrowding at St. Peter's. Although the Diocese of Memphis separated from the Diocese of Nashville in 1921, it was very small and still had a missionary-type structure. It was not until 1970 that Pope Paul VI established the Diocese of Memphis as it is known today. Six months later, Carroll Dosier was installed as the city's first bishop. Today, there are 65,000-70,000 Catholics in the Diocese of Memphis. There are approximately 46 parishes and 13 Catholic schools.

I found it very interesting to learn about my state's history, and how Catholicism made its way to my hometown of Memphis. I'm thankful for the French missionaries who faithfully spread the truth to the settlers of the Tennessee region. Because of them, my faith grows stronger every day in this amazing Catholic community.

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