

# The Roman Catholic Church in New York State

by Alicia Alleyne

In the first half of the nineteenth century many immigrants came to New York from Ireland and Germany who were Roman Catholic. Those from Ireland were fleeing poverty and oppression and later starvation caused by the Great Potato famine. Germans fled religious and political oppression that grew out of near constant warfare. One thing they brought with them to this country was their religion. Immigrant journeys began in uncertainty and in New York hustlers, thieves, and other people waited to exploit the new immigrants. From the start, the Roman Catholic Church was an important institution in their new lives as it spoke out against the poor treatment of immigrants and tried to assist them.

New York became a Roman Catholic diocese in 1808 as Catholic immigrants swelled the population of the city and state. Catholic immigrants helped construct the Erie Canal, bridges, roads, railroads and other dangerous public works projects. As the number of Roman Catholics grew, there was an increase in the number of churches and an influx of priests from Ireland and Germany. These men left their homelands to ensure that their brothers and sisters were receiving the Catholic religious teachings in their new land. By the time of the Civil War, Roman Catholicism was no longer a minority religion in New York City. St Paul's in Harlem was organized in 1834. St Lawrence's in Yorkville was established in 1851. Both parishes were responses to the expansion of the Harlem Railroad on the eastside of Manhattan Island. The construction of the Hudson River Railroad had a similar effect on the West Side of New York.

Initially the diocese in New York struggled to provide for the great influx of immigrants, however

stability came in the person of John Hughes, an Irish immigrant to the United States. Hughes was ordained as a priest in 1826 and assigned to Philadelphia. He was consecrated Bishop of New York in 1842 and became an Archbishop in 1850 when the city became a new archdiocese. Under Hughes' leadership, the archdiocese built new churches, orphanages, hospitals, poor houses, and schools. It created the basic institutional structure that New York's Roman Catholic Church possesses to this day.

During the 19th century, the Irish dominated the church in New York, largely because of their numbers. This caused tension between the Irish and Germans. Although Germans came to the United States better off financially than the Irish, they had to worship in Irish churches where they did not understand the language or culture. The Germans demanded their own churches and priests, which started a move to have ethnic and culturally oriented Catholic Churches. Nativist sentiment, fueled by competition between the Irish and native-born Americans for jobs, frequently expressed itself as opposition to the Roman Catholic Church. This can be seen in the anti-Catholic political cartoons of Thomas Nast (<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ganges1876.jpg>)

As transportation improved and work opportunities expanded, Catholic immigrants traveled north out of the city to escape the crime and disease ridden life there. As a result, Albany became a diocese of the Catholic Church in 1847. New churches were erected in Albany, Schenectady, Troy and other areas of the Albany diocese. By 1850, the Roman Catholic Church was the largest religious denomination in the

United States and it remains a significant part of the nation's religious landscape.

**Source:** Dolan, J. (1975). *The Immigrant Church, New York's Irish and German Catholics 1815-1865*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins.

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