



CATHOLICS
in NEW YORK
1808 – 1946



MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
MAY 16 – DECEMBER 31, 2008

CATHOLICS in NEW YORK

1808–1946

Catholics have been a part of the mosaic of New York since the 17th century. Once a tiny oppressed minority, they became the region's single largest religious group, with more than 400 parishes within the five boroughs by the end of World War II. *Catholics in New York, 1808–1946* looks at the formative period of Catholic New York, from 1808, when the Diocese of New York was established, to 1946, the year that the G.I. Bill made it possible for returning war veterans and their families to leave crowded urban parishes for greener towns and suburbs, leaving behind a Catholic New York that would be remade by future arrivals from around the world.

During the intervening years, generations of Catholic immigrants and their descendants transformed a city that initially greeted them with suspicion and often outright hostility. They created distinctive neighborhoods with a vibrant and varied culture. They built a vast array of Catholic institutions—hospitals, schools, orphanages, and social welfare organizations—that came to serve millions of New Yorkers of all faiths. And they rose to political prominence in the city, dominating the Democratic Party and influencing all aspects of New York's government.



above
The Cascio family, Italian-American Catholics, ca. 1921
Courtesy of the Russo and Corrao Families



below
Mr. and Mrs. Al Smith with their five children, 1915
Museum of the City of New York,
gift of the Family of Governor Alfred E.
Smith, 45.117.240

FAMILY, PARISH, AND COMMUNITY

Catholic New York underwent a dramatic transformation over the course of the 19th century. Mass immigration, first from Ireland and Germany, then from Eastern and Southern Europe, swelled the population rapidly, creating Catholic neighborhoods and a Catholic majority in the city. Together, this diverse group helped to redefine what it meant to be a New Yorker, transforming not just the church, but the city itself.



Catholic New York was mapped by parish rather than by neighborhood, with parishes based on language being established for new immigrant groups. The community of faith and ethnicity extended into the workplace, the classroom, the athletic field and gymnasium, the meeting hall, and into the streets, as New York Catholics joined together in sodalities, fraternal groups, schools, youth activities, and charitable service organizations, and marked their holidays and rites of passage in shared celebrations. Many New York Catholics today recall an era when one could go through life in the city's neighborhoods without meeting anyone who was not Catholic.

left
John Costanza, *Italian Festa (La Festa di Santa Lucia)*, ca. 1960
Museum of the City of New York,
gift of the artist, 96.190



above right
Fitzgerald Wedding, *Our Lady of the Assumption, the Bronx, 1937*
Courtesy of Raymond Fitzgerald

below right
Our Lady of Lourdes, Brooklyn,
basketball team, 1936
Courtesy of the Roman Catholic
Diocese of Brooklyn

"CARING FOR OUR OWN"

The vast number of Catholic institutions that dot New York City — schools, hospitals, childcare and social service agencies — grew not only out of the teachings of the church and the devotion of its adherents, but also out of a response to the pervasive discrimination that Catholics encountered in the Protestant-run public institutions of the 19th century. New York Catholics, both lay and religious, worked to fashion a blanket of institutions and social services that would insulate Catholics from the often hostile world around them. Depending on the largely unpaid labor of



members of the city's Catholic orders, particularly the thousands of women religious who served as teachers, nurses, and administrators, Catholic institutions became an important part of the social safety net for all of New York.

A key figure in this story was John Hughes (1797–1864), fourth bishop and first archbishop of the Archdiocese, who worked to make the Roman Catholic Church the institutional, cultural, and social focal point of immigrant life. He spearheaded the creation of the Catholic school system, of Catholic orphanages, and of what would become Fordham University, and launched the ambitious plan to build a grand new cathedral on Fifth Avenue. His popular nickname "Dagger John" referred not only to the shape of the cross that accompanied his printed signature but also, in the minds of his critics, to his dominating personality.



left
A.D. Fisk, *Sister Irene (Fitzgibbon) and Her Flock*, ca. 1890
Museum of the City of New York, Jacob Riis Collection #94, 90.12.1.97

right
***The Most Rev. John Hughes, D.D.*, published by Currier & Ives, ca. 1860**
Museum of the City of New York, gift of Mr. Gerald LeVino, 57.100.13



VOTERS AND CITIZENS

Catholics transformed the city not only by creating institutions, but also by rising to power in municipal politics. The Democratic Party was the first to welcome them, and Irish Catholics soon came to dominate the party and through it the city's government. At first, Catholic voters made up the rank and file—but not the leadership—of the Democratic machine. But they soon worked their way up the political ladder, attaining

above left
William Russell Grace
commemorative medal, 1980
Museum of the City of New York,
gift of W.R. Grace & Co.

below left
John Albok, [Congressman Vito
Marcantonio at World War II victory
rally], 1943
Museum of the City of New York,
gift of Ilona Albok Parker, 82.68.27



positions of power as Tammany bosses and eventually becoming the candidates themselves.

The city's first Catholic mayor, William R. Grace, was elected in 1880; by the first half of the 20th century, many of the city's mayors were Catholics. In 1928, the very popular Al Smith, then New York's Democratic Governor, became the first Catholic to be nominated for President by a major political party. Although he lost to Herbert Hoover in an election marred by a blizzard of anti-Catholic propaganda, his nomination symbolized a political coming of age for New York Catholics on the national stage.

As citizens, Catholics participated fully in the civic life of the city and state through organized political activity, military service, and labor and civil rights activism, holding a wide variety of political beliefs—from conservative to radical and everything in between.

above right
H. Gillam, *The Tiger's Share*, ca. 1890
Museum of the City of New York,
33.124

below right
[The sachems of Tammany Hall], 1929
Museum of the City of New York,
gift of the Family of Governor Alfred E.
Smith, 45.117.260

EPILOGUE: THE NEW CATHOLIC NEW YORK

The year after World War II ended was a watershed moment for Catholic New York.

The opportunities presented by the G.I. Bill sent many urban Catholics to trade school or college and beckoned their growing families away from older urban parish neighborhoods to the new suburbs being built beyond the five boroughs. The swift growth of new communities on Long Island led to the creation of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rockville Centre in 1957.

left
Dignitaries marching in *La Fiesta de San Juan Bautista* parade, 1962
Courtesy of the Felipe N. Torres Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY



This was just the first step in the transformation of Catholic New York. New Catholic arrivals, beginning with Puerto Ricans shortly after World War II and followed more recently by immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa, have come with their own social, community, and religious traditions, often settling in neighborhoods very different from the all-Catholic ones in which previous generations lived. The aging of priests, brothers, and women religious has created a crisis for many Catholic institutions, bringing greater dependence on lay leaders at the parish level and on professionals within the charitable institutions and schools. Today, Catholics in New York are still the city's largest religious group, but one whose character and role in the city have changed profoundly and will continue to evolve as New York itself changes.

above right
Robert Sefcik, *St. Patrick's Cathedral, Fifth Avenue, New York City*, 1979
Museum of the City of New York, gift of the photographer, 81.165.43

below right
Our Lady of Mount Carmel festival, Brooklyn, 2003
James Estrin/The New York Times/Redux

front cover
Saint Patrick's Cathedral, Easter, 1941
Museum of the City of New York, Gift of the Department of Local Government, Public Record Office of South Australia, 90.28.52

Major funding for *Catholics in New York, 1808–1946* is provided by the Homeland Foundation. Additional support comes from Emigrant Savings Bank, Adrian and Jessie Archbold Charitable Trust, Jennifer and James Cacioppo, Russell Carson, Mrs. John L. Dowling, Paula and Thomas McInerney, Thomas C. Quick, Diane and James E. Quinn, Mr. and Mrs. James E. Buckman, Catholic Health Services of Long Island, Patricia de Visscher, F.J. Sciame Construction Co., Mr. and Mrs. Craig Gibson, Paul Guarner, Thomas S. Murphy, Julia V. Shea, William M. and Miriam F. Meehan Foundation, Martin McLaughlin, Ronay and Richard Menschel, Marie and William Powers Charitable Trust, Terence S. and Emily Souvaine Meehan, Charles Millard, Carrol A. Muccia, Jr., William C. Dowling, Jr. Foundation, William H. Sadlier, Inc., and Jane B. and Ralph A. O'Connell, and many other generous supporters.

Exhibition Committee: Jane B. O'Connell and James E. Quinn, Exhibition Co-Chairs, with Helen T. Lowe, Julia V. Shea, Angela Dinger, James E. Buckman, James Cacioppo, Russell L. Carson, John V. Connorton, Jr., Mrs. John L. Dowling, Paul Guarner, Pete Hamill, Frank Macchiarola, Myra and Arthur J. Mahon, Howard Milstein, Edward Mohylowski, Thomas S. Murphy, Rev. Joseph A. O'Hare, S.J., Thomas C. Quick, Hon. Christine C. Quinn, Hon. Domenic M. Recchia, Jr., Frank J. Sciame, Alfred E. Smith IV, and E. Lisk Wyckoff, Jr.

Advisory Committee: Tyler Anbinder, Mary Elizabeth Brown, Terry Golway, Bernadette McCauley, Patrick J. McNamara, Edward Mohylowski, and Robert A. Slayton.

Curator: Deborah Dependahl Waters

Contributing Curator: Sarah M. Henry

Curatorial Consultant: Terry Golway

Curatorial Associates: Autumn Nyiri and Susan Gail Johnson

Exhibition Design: Boym Partners, Inc.

Graphic Design: Yvette Lenhart Design

Lighting Design: Anita Jorgenson Lighting Design

Documentary Producer/Multimedia Developer: David Tarnow

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication, *Catholics in New York: Society, Culture, and Politics, 1808–1946*, edited by Terry Golway and co-published by Fordham University Press and the Museum of the City of New York.

For information on public programs related to *Catholics in New York, 1808–1946*, please visit www.mcny.org.

For information about group tours, please call 212.534.1672, ext. 3393.

For information about scheduling school programs for this exhibition, please call 212.534.1672, ext. 3334.

Museum Hours

Tuesday–Sunday: 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
Closed Mondays except for Monday holidays.

Directions

By bus: M1, M3, M4 or M106 to 104th Street, or M2 to 101st Street

By subway: #6 to 103rd Street, walk three blocks west, or #2/3 to Central Park North (110th Street), walk one block east to Fifth Avenue, then south to 103rd Street



Museum of the City of New York
1220 Fifth Avenue at 103rd Street
New York, NY 10029
212.534.1672
www.mcny.org