

Out of the Tenements

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As the 1870's progressed, the Irish in America and the Irish-Americans began to move up out of the poverty that was their existence since the famine years. Although the discrimination against the Irish-Catholics was still rampant, their economic situation was improving to the level that many could be considered middle class and some even upper class. Much of the improvement in the lives of the Irish-Catholics could be attributed to three factors; the politics (the Democratic Party), the Catholic Church, and the strong sense of community.

The growing political influence of Irish-Catholic Americans was first shown by the succession of "Honest John" Kelly to the leadership of Tammany Hall. When Kelly took over, the Irish were no longer given just lower level jobs. They now took positions throughout the city bureaucracy. New York was now "Irish". The political success was soon mirrored in most of America's cities outside of the south. The political clout and economic strength of the Irish was growing and would soon be influencing national politics.

The Catholic Church in New York and in the United States was truly an "Irish" church. Unlike the church in other countries, the Catholic Church in Ireland had been the church of the poor and the oppressed, not the church of the aristocracy and the wealthy. Because of the class connection between the people and the church, the church had wide popular support. This support continued in the United States where the Irish had a much higher rate of church attendance than other Catholics, native or immigrant.

The Catholic Church stressed education for the children of the Irish immigrants. More than half of New York's parishes had schools.

Almost twenty percent of Irish children attended these schools. The others attended public schools, but the majority if their teachers were Irish Catholic women. This combination of attachment to the church and stressing education led Irish-Americans by 1900 to have "achieved relative occupational parity with native white America (WASP's) : that is, roughly the same proportions of male Irish-Americans were engaged in white collar or farming (35 percent), skilled (50 percent) and unskilled (15 percent) laboring occupations as were white American's of native birth and parentage. The principal difference was in the farming sector where Irish-Americans were minimally represented."*

The sense of community was equally important. When prominent cartoonists, like Thomas Nast were portraying the Irish Catholics as ape like drunks and rowdies, it was important for the Irish to support and defend their own. Organizations like the Ancient Order of Hibernians and others did just that. These organizations at first protected the Irish communities against violence. They then and now supported and promoted the values and virtues of Irish culture, sport, and history. They, then and now have encouraged the support of the Irish business community. The sense of community for the Irish Catholics has held us together and lifted us up to greatness.

In conclusion, sense of community, Catholic values and education, and political activism made the Irish one of, if not the greatest immigrant success stories in American history, from the famine, to the slaughter on Eighth Ave., to the presidency, and beyond.

*** Miller, Kerby A., Emigrants and Exiles, 1985, Oxford Univ. Press**