Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

John Hughes: Eagle of the Church (by Doran Hurley)

His critics called him "Dagger John." A bishop usually draws a small cross in front of his signature (similar to a plus sign+). Not having this symbol, New York typesetters substituted a longer cross-like symbol known as a dagger **(†)** whenever Hughes sent newspapers his arguments and rebuttals on the many controversies he was involved in. Hence the nickname given by Hughes' opponents. Although not kindly meant, it was true enough as shorthand for one of Hughes' essential traits: he was a fighter. He'd had enough of being pushed around in Ireland, where it had been a crime for a Catholic to attend Mass or attempt to get an education. He had come to America for freedom, and he wasn't going to take this nonsense all over again here. Neither would his Church or his beleaguered Irish people take it under his watch if he had anything to say about it.

While in its infancy on American soil—both colonial and newly independent—the Church had to keep a low profile while it scrambled to found missions and build the bare bones infrastructure needed to simply administer the sacraments to its scattered flock. Since Catholicism was frowned on, and in some colonies, legally penalized, the church's focus was on sheer survival. Even as the Church began to thrive, a new threat came from within, in the form of the church trusteeship disputes, disputes which threatened to turn American Catholics into an independent, congregational sect. Good priests (such as Fr. Gabriel Richard, subject of another *Portraits* title) suffered under intransigent lay people who dictated the terms under which clergy could serve them. Bishops who tried conciliatory and diplomatic approaches hardly made a dent in the problem.

Scripture tells us there is "a time to keep silence and a time to speak out, a time for war and a time for peace" (Ecclesiastes 3:7-8). Fr. John Hughes decided the time for speaking out had come. When the board of trustees at St. Mary's Church in Philadelphia refused to let him have the last word on parish administration, he effectively "fired" his congregation, walking out and leaving the church without a pastor. The trustees, accustomed to passing judgment on their priests, learned what it was like to be judged unworthy by their pastor (NB: Our book does not record this episode.) As Bishop of New York he wrested parishes from trustees through a combination of buying out their debts and exerting the authority of his office (and the sheer force of his personality) to the fullest. He also took rhetorical arms against a sea of troubles, including anti-Catholic preachers, nativism rabble-rousers, and the New York school system. He won some battles and lost others, sometimes over-reaching when compromise might have served him better. He struggled with the virtues of patience and charity; one wonders what would have happened without the restraining influence of his gentle mentor, Bishop Simon Bruté (see Portraits title, *Simon Brute and the Western Adventure*). On the other hand, his zeal and courage in defense of the Church and his championing of the poor immigrant were precisely what was needed for Hughes to accomplish so much in his time as archbishop of New York. The schools, orphanages and hospitals he built were arguably the portal through which the Irish (as well as other poor ethnic European immigrants) would, within two generations of Hughes' death, be a successful, even a dominant presence at all levels of New York government, commerce, and

society. Our next title, *Alfred E. Smith: Sidewalk Statesman,* offers a good picture of the progress that occurred during this period.

Chapter 8 describes Bishop Hughes' convoluted views about slavery, emancipation, and the Civil War. It seems strange to us that the huge wave of Irish immigrants in the 1840s and 50s, who came to escape virtual slavery and a near genocide did not—by and large—have much compassion for former slaves who came to northern cities, seeking the same freedom they had sought. Let's not forget that Irish poverty was nearly as desperate in New York as it had been in Ireland; so fear of competition for already scarce employment was real. Bishop Hughes, however, is less easy to excuse than his people. He knew slavery was wrong and expressed this from his youth. As the years went by and the slavery debate became heated, it seems that he began to rationalize and justify slavery (as did many other leaders in and out of the Church) because the practical question of what to do with masses of freed slaves seemed insoluble. Few people had the ability to even imagine—let alone to desire or work towards—racial equality and integration. Even many prominent abolitionists, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, believed that freed slaves would be best served by being given their own colony in Africa. For Archbishop Hughes, pragmatism and ethnic loyalty triumphed over principle. His primary aim was to raise the welfare and standing of New York Catholics, and these were overwhelmingly Irish. One wishes that Hughes could have met the saintly ex-slave, Pierre Toussaint, who lived in New York and died in the third year of Hughes' tenure. Such a meeting might have softened Hughes' heart and transformed his outlook towards his African brothers in Christ.

But it would be wrong if memory of Hughes' accomplishments were buried beneath criticism of his racial views. There, he was a man of his times. In other realms, he was a visionary. He knew that a million half-starved, illiterate, tuberculosis-ridden immigrants, written off as a sub-human "criminal class" by others, could succeed in New York if given the necessary conditions—education, healthcare, and the spiritual and social support of the parish church—to exercise their American freedoms.

For many years, the slowly rising St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue was known as "Hughes' folly": it seemed senseless to place this huge, costly structure out in the sticks, so far beyond what was then the throbbing nerve center of Manhattan Island. Today its location is considered "midtown," an oasis of peace and prayer amidst the skyscrapers. Once again, Archbishop Hughes saw something about New York's potential that no one else could.

Besides the imprint he left on New York City, John Hughes' legacy to all American Christians was his example of engaging the public square with confidence. Hughes would laugh in the face of any suggestion that the establishment clause in the First Amendment prevents believers from stating out loud what they know to be true, with the hope of influencing public policy. A religious body may not *impose* its doctrine, (we American wouldn't want it any other way), but religious citizens can—and should—*propose* with vigor what they know to be good and right. Hughes' muscular faith is an antidote for temptations to cowardice, relativism, or despair when it comes to our duty to engage society.