

# History



John Hughes, Fourth bishop and first Archbishop of New York. It was the symbol of the Cross in his signature that gave rise to his nickname "Dagger John"

## Bishop John Hughes

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John Hughes was born in June 27, 1797 in Annalougham, Co. Tyrone to a poor tenant farmer. The anti-Catholic Penal Laws had a profound effect on the young Hughes; he later noted that for the first seven days of his life he enjoyed full civil and legal rights, but lost them upon his baptism into the Catholic Church. However, the event that would transform him into a crusader against oppression occurred when his younger sister died in 1812. As the family went to bury the child, the Catholic Priest was barred by British officials from entering the cemetery. Improvising, the Priest had the 15-year-old Hughes bring him soil from the gravesite, which he blessed, and Hughes then brought back to be sprinkled on his sister's grave so that she could be buried in consecrated soil.

Hughes emigrated to America at the age of 20 and secured employment as a gardener at Mount St. Mary's College and Seminary in Emmitsburg, MD. Hughes wished to enter the priesthood, but he was turned down due to his lack of formal education. However, he met the future St. Elizabeth Ann Seton when she visited Mount St. Mary's and through her influence he was admitted to the Seminary in 1820. He was ordained in 1826.

Fr. Hughes was first assigned to the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. It is here he would prove an eloquent spokesman for the rights of Catholics. He engaged in an editorial campaign against newspapers that all too frequently featured stories of the "threat" that "popery" and Irish Catholics posed to the nation. In one case Fr. Hughes wrote a series of letters to a Nativist Newspaper under an assumed name detailing fictitious and absurd charges of the threats

posed by the Catholic Church to America. After the editor published them and complimented the writer for his "righteous vigilance", Hughes then in another newspaper revealed it was he who wrote the letters and exposed the paper in question as the mechanism of hate it was. It was actions such as these that would have one newspaper observe "(Hughes was) more a Roman gladiator than a devout follower of the meek founder of Christianity."

When a Cholera epidemic swept the city of Philadelphia, many of the city leaders who had railed against the threat of "traitorous popery" fled the city, while Fr. Hughes and the Sisters of Charity cared for the city's sick without regard to their own safety. When the epidemic had passed, Fr. Hughes was quick to publicly point out how loyal the followers of "traitorous popery" had been to the citizens of Philadelphia while many of the Catholic Church's detractors had fled. Fr. Hughes accepted a challenge to debate the prominent clergymen John Bekenridge that drew national attention. Against Bekenridge's lurid images of the Spanish Inquisition, Fr. Hughes countered with his own experiences of protestant persecution in Ireland. Hughes concluded "I am an American by choice, not by chance... I know the value of that civil and religious liberty, which our happy government secures for all."

It was however in New York and as Bishop, that Hughes would gain his renown. His congregation was described as 'the debris of the Irish Nation'; the poor, the uneducated and the orphaned driven to America by persecution and famine. Drawing upon his own experience, he realized that education was the answer. He took on, in alliance with New York's Jewish community, the public school system which at the time was run with state funds by the private Protestant Public School Society. Hughes vehemently objected to curricula which featured books such as "The Irish Heart" which taught that "(Irish Immigrants are) in many cases drunken and depraved... a subject for all our grave and fearful reflection." While Bishop Hughes's intent was to gain equal funding for Catholic Schools, the result of his campaign was the Maclay Bill which barred all religious instruction from public schools and provided no state money to denominational schools. Having at least secured that prejudice was mitigated in the public schools, Hughes set out to build the parochial school system of New York, which would become a model for the nation. Knowing that in the school house lay the future of Irish Americans "build your own schools; raise arguments in the shape of the best educated and most moral citizens of the Republic, and the day will come when you will enforce recognition".

Hughes work for the Irish immigrant community was untiring, both in their development to good citizens and in protecting their rights in an increasingly hostile nativist environment. He was a founder of the Emigrant Aid Society which would eventually become the Emigrant Bank. He encouraged self-help groups in all his parishes. At the height of the "Know Nothing" activities when several Catholic

### Did you Know that....

- At the time when Fr. Hughes was elevated to Bishop in 1838, the diocese covered all of New York State and a large part of New Jersey. It contained 200,000 Catholics for which there were but twenty churches, no seminaries nor Catholic Universities.
- Among the school founded by Bishop Hughes were four colleges: St. Johns (later to be renamed Fordham University), Manhattan College, Marymount and Mount St. Vincent's.
- New York City's first Cathedral Church was Old St Patrick's at the corner of Prince and Mott Streets. Built in 1815, it would be the seat of the Archdiocese until 1879 with the completion of the Cathedral of St. Patrick at 50th Street and Fifth.
- During the American Civil War, Bishop Hughes at the request of President Lincoln, made a tour of Europe to help gain support for the Union cause at a time when there was a considerable fear that Europe would officially recognize and aid the Confederacy.
- So successful was Bishop Hughes parochial school system that it was adopted by the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884 for parishes across the nation.

Churches were burnt in Philadelphia, New York City Officials ironically appealed to Hughes to issue a pastoral letter, asking for the Irish community to show "restraint" should similar Catholic Church burnings occur in New York. Hughes was infuriated that the city administration's first thought was to restrain the Irish Community from reprisal rather than to exercise its responsibility to protect the property of Catholic citizens. Hughes response was characteristic and legendary "if a single Catholic church is burned, this city will become another Moscow" referring to when the citizens of Moscow burned their own city rather than see it occupied by Napoleon's troops. Several times, he called on the Irish community, in particularly the Hibernians, to defend church property where the show of strength was sufficient to deter violence before it started. Bishop Hughes' zealotness in defending his flock caused his opponents to seize on the shape of the cross Hughes made next to his signature when signing letters and dubbed him "Dagger John".

Bishop Hughes became the first Archbishop of New York in 1850. Though he started the "new St. Patrick's Cathedral" he would not live to see it finished, that would be the work of his successor, Archbishop McCloskey. However, Archbishop Hughes did not need a Cathedral to be his monument. His true monument was that through his leadership and the dedication of the Irish community, the children of "the debris of the Irish Nation" that he had found on his arrival in New York were by the time of his death protecting New York as Police and Firemen, healing the city's sick, educating the young, and leading her government.