Persecuted to Powerful: Exhibiting a History of New York's Catholics

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Published: May 15, 2008

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Hundreds of years ago, there was a tiny religious minority so despised and persecuted that it was forced to build its own educational, social-welfare and political infrastructure just to survive in the city of New York. Improbably enough, this subculture ultimately seized power from the entrenched majority, became the city's largest Christian group, created institutions that affected everyone in the five boroughs and permanently changed what it meant to be a New Yorker.

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Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

A new exhibit on Catholics in New York tells a story of transformation with some 400 objects and images.

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Preparing "Catholics in New York, 1808 to 1946," which runs through Dec. 31 at the Museum of the City of New York.

Yet a museum has never devoted a major exhibition to the history of this transformational group — that is, until Friday, when "Catholics in New York, 1808 to 1946," opens to the public at the Museum of the City of New York.

The show, with some 400 objects and images, includes political banners, parochial school report cards, yearbooks going back to the 19th century, vestments, school uniforms, trophies, academic medals and a pew rental receipt. There are holy cards, ceremonial swords, parade sashes and a first communion outfit from 1941. And there are more than 100 family photographs, as well as oral histories on audio and video conducted for the exhibition.

"They started as a tiny group, yet changed the city for New Yorkers who were not Catholic, changing the nature of politics, social welfare and public life," said Sarah M. Henry, the museum's chief curator.

The city's Roman Catholics have been troubled lately by controversy after controversy, and the exhibition makes it clear that their religion has drawn criticism from its earliest years.

Through the generations, negative characterizations of the church changed along with the power of the church — from nativist xenophobia about "the Catholic Menace" to more modern conflicts: anti-Communist fervor, school closings, sexual abuse of children by priests, and the censuring of politicians who favor abortion rights.

Though the show coincides with the bicentennial of the founding of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, the exhibition was conceived and curated independently by the museum, which received no financing from the archdiocese, it said.

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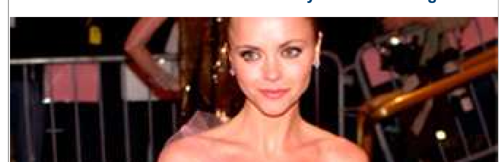

The archdiocese and its archives, churches and religious orders lent more than 20 objects to the exhibition, and Cardinal Edward M. Egan is expected to attend the invitation-only opening reception on Thursday. In addition, museum curators took out advertisements in diocesan publications asking for historic artifacts and documents for the 4,000-square-foot exhibition, which will be on view until Dec. 31.

Previously, in both historical circles and popular discussion, "for the most part there has been a focus on discrete ethnic groups — the Irish, Italians and Germans, for example — forgetting that most of them had one thing in common: They were Catholic," said Terry Golway, an exhibition adviser who directs the Kean Center for American History at Kean University in Union, N.J.

In recent years, historians have offered new insights about the complex diversity of the Catholic experience in the city, as well as its highly localized organization, its painful accommodation of successive waves of immigrants, and the tremendous differences in Catholic identity within neighborhoods and parishes.

Given the reality that New York was the point of entry for so many immigrant Catholic groups, "other cities did not have the mosaic experience of Catholic life that we did in New York," said Mr. Golway, the editor of the exhibition's companion publication, "Catholics in New York: Society, Culture and Politics 1808 to 1946."

He added: "Though many immigrants moved on, they left their residue. This is what gave the Catholic community in New York its flavor and complexity."

Among the various Catholic groups worshiping in the city were African-Americans, Slovaks, Czechs, Lithuanians, Hungarians, Ukrainians and Hispanics (on view is an 1842 Spanish Bible), including an influx of Puerto Rican Catholics after the Spanish-American War in 1898.

In the end, Mr. Golway said, "all of these groups were of a communion — they were Catholics, and shared the sacraments and other hallmarks of Catholic spirituality." Catholics were united, too, he added, by "discrimination and the oppression they experienced."

A persecuted minority in colonial New York, Catholics were denied all religious and civil liberties except for the few years in the 1680s when the Catholic Stuart monarchs ruled England.

But during the American Revolution they gained religious freedom, and by 1785, the small band of Catholics had established the city's first parish, St. Peter's.

Of the 70,000 New Yorkers in 1806, 10,000 were Catholic. But starting in the 1840s, immigration swelled the population so rapidly that by the end of the Civil War nearly half of all New Yorkers were Catholic.

On view are objects that helped fuel anti-Catholic fervor, like best-selling, luridly fictionalized tales of life in convents, including the 1836 "Awful Disclosures by Maria Monk, of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal." The author, a prostitute, was eventually exposed as a fraud and died in 1849 in a New York prison.

The show offers a celebrated relic of 19th-century life, the so-called Children's Chalice, a gilded silver chalice that was a gift from Archbishop John Hughes to the 1,400 children of St. Bridget's School in 1862. As the first archbishop of the newly named Archdiocese of New York, he battled anti-Catholic nativists and initiated the construction of St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue, which "became the physical symbol of the powerful presence of the church," said Deborah Dependahl Waters, the lead curator.

He also pushed for separate Catholic institutions to protect his flock from an often hostile environment. The exhibition chronicles the creation of a social welfare system spanning health, education and family care.

It included schools, hospitals, colleges and seminaries, as well as asylums for the abandoned, poor and elderly — and cemeteries. Ultimately, many served non-Catholics as well.

The exhibition traces the influence of Catholics far beyond such public rituals as St. Patrick's Day and the San Gennaro Festival to the advent of Catholics' force in city politics.

That chronicle is framed by William R. Grace, who was elected in 1880 as the first Catholic mayor of New York City, and Alfred E. Smith, who became governor and then the first Catholic to be nominated for president by a major political party.

Ultimately, aside from their role in building the city's infrastructure, many Catholics found positions in the human infrastructure, the uniformed municipal services. Six generations of one family documented in the exhibition — the Schiaffos of the Bronx — won appointments to the New York City Department of Sanitation, from 1906 to 2001.

The grandness of the Catholic political hegemony is illustrated in the exhibition by a 6-foot-tall, 4-foot-wide "testimonial of appreciation" presented by other aldermen to Thomas Coman, president of the city's Board of Aldermen, in 1869, in a mammoth carved and gilded walnut frame.

There has always been tension between old Catholic arrivals and newer waves of Catholic immigrants. "English-speaking Irish long dominated the Catholic Church, and other ethnicities chafed under that situation," Mr. Golway said. "The Italians and the Poles and other groups demanded their own churches with priests who appreciated their own ethnic traditions."

Ultimately, a profound difference developed between "territorial" parishes, bound by geography, and "national parishes," defined by churches that served ethnic groups, said Dr. Waters. "The geography of Catholic New York was different than the geography of New York," she added. "Catholics navigated an alternative map of the city, a map of the parishes."

So, when speaking of St. Brendan's, Transfiguration, St. Teresa's, St. Charles Borromeo and St. Rita's, New York's Catholics were actually referring to neighborhoods like Norwood, Little Italy, Woodside, Brooklyn Heights and Willowbrook, respectively.

The exhibition ends in 1946, when "the familiar prewar Catholic world was remade," Dr. Henry said. The G.I. Bill became the gateway to higher education, spurring migration to the suburbs.

Historical judgment has not yet coalesced on the postwar Catholic presence in New York, Mr. Golway said: the era of liturgical reforms, declining vocations and ever-new immigrant Catholic groups.

"That change is only beginning to manifest itself," he said, adding: "We don't know how that story will end."

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