

# The De La Salle Christian Brothers in New York, 1848-1914

by Philip M. Dowd, F.S.C.

*NYIHR member Brother Philip Dowd is the Archivist at Manhattan College. He is the son of immigrants from Cutragh, Co. Cavan and was raised in St. Jerome's parish in the South Bronx.*

For the Irish people who were arriving in the United States the process of acculturation meant not only changing a way of life from a rural setting to an urban one but also from farming economy to a manufacturing or service economy. The need for different skills became apparent. Family who had preceded the newcomers, people from the same village, and the Church became the anchors and guides to this new life. The first immigrants found work as day laborers and in jobs that demanded a strong back rather than a good brain. These Irish men and women wanted more for their children and the only way these immigrant children could better themselves was to get an education.

Public education in Ireland was based on the National Schools and Catholic education during the Penal times was haphazard. So, the average immigrant might be able to read things such as a newspaper and do basic arithmetic, but not much more. As New York and the cities of the East coast turned to manufacturing, the need for education became critical. The Irish immigrants were leary of the public school system. Besides, the concept of free public education was just beginning to take hold in the era prior to the American Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

With thousands of new immigrants swelling the numbers of Catholics in New York, the Church needed to take a leading role in providing for the educational needs of their children. Archbishop John Hughes of New York recognized this need and endeavored to locate teaching orders which would be willing to establish and run schools, colleges, and other educational facilities. At first Hughes had mixed success. It seemed that he could locate religious orders to teach the girls of the diocese but he had more difficulty in locating ones to teach the boys. In 1805 the Sisters of Charity established a school. In 1841 the Religious of the Sacred Heart opened an academy for girls on Houston Street and this academy evolved into Manhattanville College. The Sisters of Mercy arrived from Dublin in 1846. With Catholic education becoming an integral part of parish life, Hughes continued working to induce religious orders to come to New York to educate the young men of the diocese.

There had been attempts to establish schools for the boys of the diocese. In 1846 the Jesuits arrived to run St. John's College which eventually became Fordham University. Hughes tried to get the Irish Christian Brothers but there were none available at that time; they finally came to the diocese in 1906. In 1846 Hughes secured the services of the Brothers of Christian Instruction but they did not establish a permanent community. Hughes continued to write letters and seek help from the teaching Orders and since there were so few religious communities in the United States, he had to look to the European religious for help.

When Hughes learned that the De La Salle Christian Brothers had established Calvert Hall (a boy's school in Baltimore), the Archbishop wrote Brother Philippe, the Superior General of the Order which was headquartered in Paris. In 1847 the Superior General sent an envoy to look at the needs of the New York

diocese and make some recommendations. At the same time Father La Font of St. Vincent de Paul's Church on Canal Street, who had a nephew in this order, made a request asking the Brothers to establish a parish school. At first, Archbishop Hughes wanted the Brothers to take over the administration of an orphan asylum but Brother Philippe disagreed. As the Superior General, he felt that establishing schools would be a better use of the Brothers and he sent the first De La Salle Christian Brothers to fill New York's need.

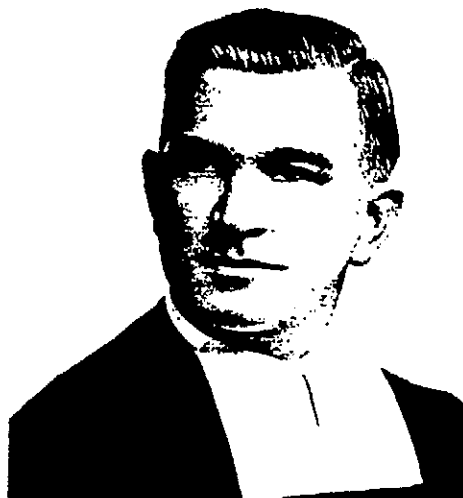
Four Brothers from France arrived on the ship "Franklin" in July 1848 and spent the summer learning to speak English with the help of Francis Barat, a young man of St. Paul's parish who later became Brother John Chrysostom. Between 1848 and 1900 the Brothers opened thirty-five schools in the diocese.<sup>2</sup> Some of the more famous schools include St. Nicholas', St. James', St. Joseph's, St. Bridget's, and Transfiguration which were parish schools and located in lower Manhattan where the need was greatest and most new immigrants lived. From New York City the Brothers spread first in New York State to cities like Albany and Troy, then they spread throughout the country establishing five new provinces, seventy-six communities with some nine hundred brothers, and over one hundred schools.

Mention has been made above of acculturation and the importance of education in its success. In the De La Salle schools the presence of Brothers who were Irish or of Irish descent helped. Some men joined in Ireland and came here after their training. Others joined the Brothers in America. Vocation directors went to Ireland to recruit new members. In the light of the "devotional revolution" Ireland became a source of vocations for all orders, both men and women.

*Ireland has not only done a great deal during the past century for the Propagation of the Faith so that missionaries and nuns and faithful people are now to be found foremost in everything going on in the various missions of the new world, but at present the whole country may be regarded as a vast recruiting field for sustaining the missions. We have in Kilkenny at present an American (De La Salle) Christian Brother seeking young men to join that order in the United States. They have at present 500 Irishmen among the Christian Brothers and only 200 of other nationalities. They have seven colleges in the United States and the Superiors of them all are Irish. Nevertheless they are called the "French Christian Brothers." At present they desire at least fifty more Irish postulants, as they find that none labor so zealously and efficiently in the American schools as the Irish Brothers.<sup>3</sup>*

The graduates of these schools continued their education and became doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and teachers as well as members of the clergy. St. Nicholas', which was located on East Second Street, was a "German" school and was the alma mater of Cardinal Mundelein, an auxiliary Bishop in Brooklyn and later archbishop of Chicago. Al Smith, governor of New York State and candidate for President, graduated from St. James', which was located in lower Manhattan. Archbishop Mitty of San Francisco went to St. Joseph's in Greenwich Village. Patrick Cardinal Hayes graduated from the Transfiguration parish school. St.

Brother M. Alphonsus, F.S.C., M.A.



Brother A. William, F.S.C., M.A.



Brother Basil, F.S.C., M.Sc.



Brother M. Ambrose, F.S.C., M.A.



Brother A. Poramian, F.S.C.,  
B.S. in C.E., M.A.



Brother D. Francis, F.S.C., M.A.



Brother Augustine, F.S.C., M.A.

*De La Salle faculty members at Manhattan College, 1936. Courtesy of Patricia Little Taylor.*

Bridget's held the record for vocations. Men who had been taught by the Brothers seemed to carry a great affection for their schools and teachers.

In the late 1800's one of the major social problems in American cities was the care of destitute children. Large number of immigrants were in poor health and many died without any money to provide for their children. A group of Catholic laymen undertook this problem by forming the "Society for the Protection of Destitute Children."<sup>4</sup> The Society located two dwellings on East 36th and 37th Streets and asked the Brothers to take charge of these residences for boys. Later the Sisters of Charity would take charge of the residence for girls which was located at East 86th Street and Second Avenue. Within a year the boys' residence moved to East 86th Street near Fifth Avenue. The Society soon realized that this was a bigger problem than they had anticipated. Within two years of the start of the residences for destitute children the Society purchased 117 acres in what is now the Parkchester section of the Bronx. The first building constructed was for the boys. The Catholic Protectors, as it was called, expanded and grew until over two thousand children were being cared for at one time. The Protectors provided the children with the academic skill they would need but also trained them in many of the trades until 1938.<sup>5</sup>

As the number of grammar schools grew, the De La Salle Brothers harnessed the youthful spirit of rivalry by having competitions. A Brother Inspector of Schools visited the schools twice each semester, visiting all the classes, reviewing the written work of the pupils, and giving a report on each class as well as the school as a whole. Banners were awarded to the best school overall and to the best classes at each grade level. There were city-wide competitions in spelling bees, elocution demonstrations, and mental arithmetic as well as sporting events. Their first city-wide track and field meet was held in 1906 for the Catholic School Athletic League which had been founded by Brother Beran Edmund. Clason Point Academy in "West Chester" (the East Bronx) was the site of the outdoor meets while the indoor meets were held at De La Salle Institute which was at that time located on Central Park South and Sixth Avenue. In 1922 the League was admitted to the Amateur Athletic Union and soon other sports were added to the roster offered at De La Salle schools.

As the youngsters graduated from grammar school, the need for higher education including high schools and colleges became apparent. A system of academies or high schools was developed by the Brothers. St. Vincent's moved to Manhattanville and assumed the name of the Academy of the Holy Infancy. Some of the other academies were La Salle Academy located on East Second Street, De La Salle Institute on Central Park South, Manhattan Academy on West 32nd Street (the present site of Madison Square Garden) and Clason Point Academy. These high schools had two tracks—an academic one for children who planned to go to college and a commercial one for children who planned to enter the business world after high school. The success of the commercial track is portrayed in the following quote about the De La Salle Institute of Chicago:

*On May 20, 1889, the Chicago Irish turned out in large numbers for the cornerstone laying of De La Salle Institute. The new school at 35th Street and Wabash Avenue testified to the increasing commitment of Irish Catholics to higher education, and it was a visible sign of upward mobility as well. The Old Christian Brothers Academy in St. Patrick's parish had been popular in the 1860s and 1870s...financed*

*by Catholic and Protestant businessmen, De La Salle aimed to prepare Catholic men for commercial careers in downtown offices.<sup>6</sup>*

The growth of the schools in New York, the demands of parents for Catholic colleges and the desire of the American Bishops to have American clergy led to the establishment of at least one college in each of the De La Salle provinces. In New York it was Manhattan College which developed from the Academy of the Holy Infancy. "About seven miles from City Hall, on the banks of the Hudson was the village of Manhattanville. In 1846 only 500 people lived there. By 1851 the Hudson River Railroad reached Manhattanville and the coming of the railroad encouraged the growth of the area. . . In 1853 the Church of the Annunciation was founded. . ." <sup>7</sup> Manhattan College adjoined this church, with the property extending between 131st and 133rd Streets, fronting on Bloomingdale Road, and with the back facing the Grand Boulevard, now Broadway.

Manhattan College admitted both boarding and commuting students which was an innovative idea in 1851. A review of the records of the registrar and of the College catalogs between 1864 and 1900 show that about 95% of the students attending Manhattan College were Irish or of Irish heritage. There were a few German surnames and some French-Canadian as well as a surprising number of students from Central and South America. As well as preparing the students for the professions, Manhattan College also prepared a goodly number of future members of the clergy, as was also true for other colleges run by the Brothers.

Manhattan College's classes were taught in English but each student was required to learn the classical languages. By the original rule of the order, the De La Salle Christian Brothers were not allowed to teach Latin. The American Bishops had requested that the Superior General make an exception for the American colleges. The Bishops argued that this was part of seminary training and since there were so few orders in the United States, the Superiors agreed. One feature of Manhattan College's customary examinations is recorded in the College's catalogue of 1864-1865:

*There are at least two public examinations during the year. To these all who take interest in education are cordially invited. Nor need they be mere spectators; the faculty are not only willing, but desirous, that they should take part in the examinations, especially those of the higher classes. Besides requiring the student to translate any passages in the part of the textbook which he has read, the examiner may propose his questions in Latin; and in the graduating classes may be addressed in Greek.<sup>8</sup>*

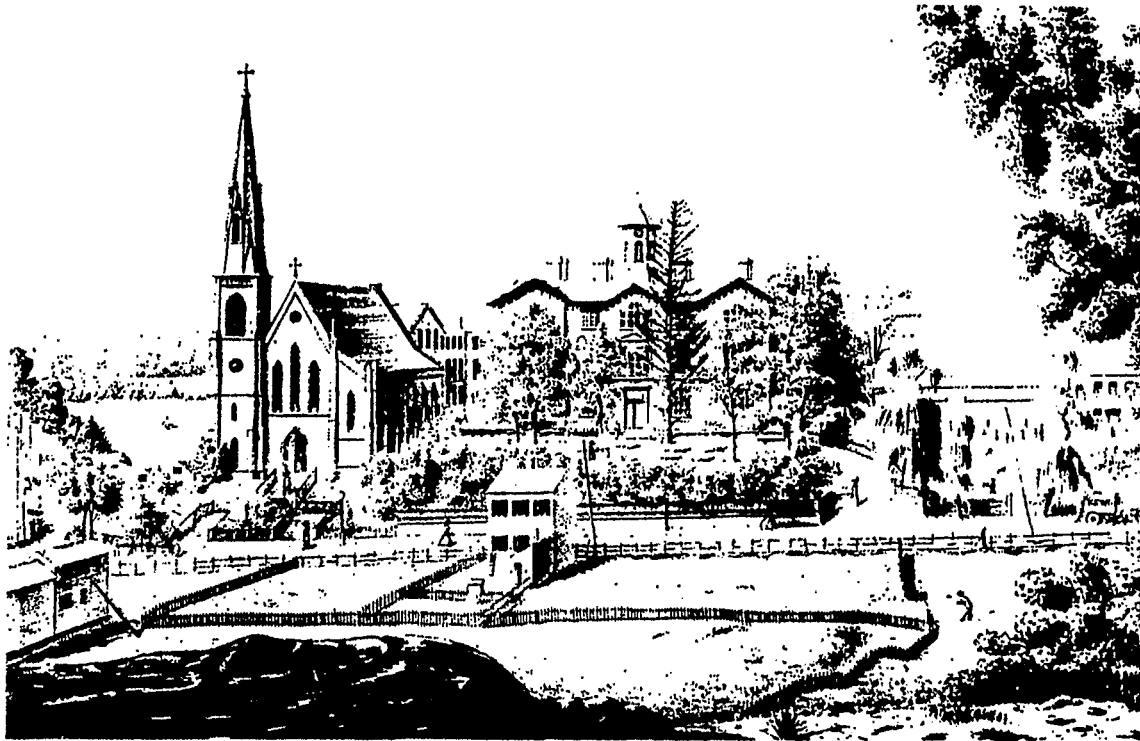
But in the 1890's the Superiors withdrew this privilege, in spite of the remonstrations of the American Bishops (who were most affected by this change) and their pleas to Rome.

In the 1890's many colleges were foundering due to economic problems. Manhattan College, fortunately, had two excellent scientists on the staff, Brothers Paulian and Potamian. These Brothers developed the School of Engineering which opened in 1892. Brother Paulian was a graduate of Queen's College, Cork and of Trinity College, Dublin. He taught engineering at McGill University in Montreal and worked as a civil engineer before becoming a Brother. Brother Potamian (born Michael O'Reilly in Bailieborough Co. Cavan) was the first Catholic to be granted a Doctor of Science degree from London University. He was also the first person to use an X-ray machine in Ireland. At Manhattan College he specialized in electronics and physics.

Another service which Manhattan College rendered to the diocese and the people of New York in the twentieth century was the founding of the "Extension Division," that enabled Sisters to earn their college degrees. Beginning in 1927, under the aegis of Brother Calixtus (who was supervisor of the Brothers' studies) and several Sisters of different orders, classes were held at St. Michael's school on West 33rd Street in the late afternoons, on Saturdays and during the summers. "Nuns from many dioceses in the Northeast attended during the years 1927-1957, four thousand in all, one thousand of whom received their bachelor's degrees. At one time or other 42 communities of Sisters participated."<sup>9</sup> The faculty for the most part were volunteers from Manhattan College,

Hunter College and qualified sisters from participating congregations.

Andrew Greeley, the sociologist, has written a good deal about the Irish. His opinions are backed by his research in the National Opinion Research Center. The De La Salle Order's history in New York gives perspective to Greeley's comments concerning the educational attainment of the Irish: "the Irish were acculturated by the turn of the century...College attendance of the Irish Catholics was above the national average by 1910...Irish Catholics are the most likely of any white American Gentile group to send their children to college...the Irish are the most financially successful of the white ethnic Gentile groups in the United States...their educational and income mobility advantage over Protestants is substantial..."<sup>10</sup>



MANHATTAN COLLEGE, 1863  
OLD BLOOMINGDALE ROAD

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> John Talbot Smith, *The Catholic Church in New York: a History of the New York diocese from its establishment in 1808 to the present time.* (New York: Hall and Locke, 1905), p. 203. Robert D. Cross, *The Emergence of Liberal Catholicism in America.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 137. For the struggle of Hughes over the public school system in New York, see Richard Shaw, *Dagger John: The Unquiet Life and Times of Archbishop John Hughes of New York.* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), pp. 139-175.

<sup>2</sup> In most of the schools to which the Brothers went they found the Sisters of Charity of Saint Mother Seton. See: Sister Mary de Lourdes Walsh, *The Sisters of Charity, 1805-1959*, Vol. II (New York: Fordham University Press, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Emmet Larkin, *The Historical Dimensions of Catholicism* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1984), p. 89, note 45: Patrick Moran to Kirby, April 27, 1876, Kirby Papers. [Rev. Patrick Francis Moran was Bishop of Ossory (1872-1884), nephew, protege, and secretary to Cardinal Cullen of Dublin. Rev. Tobias Kirby was at the Irish College in Rome and intermediary for the Irish hierarchy with the Holy See].

<sup>4</sup> *A Short Sketch of the New York Protectory, from its origin to the present* (Westchester, New York Catholic Protectory, author unknown, 1885). A similar institution was founded for orphans at Lincoln Hall, Lincoln Dale, NY, about 40 miles north of New York City. Dr. Levi Silliman Ives was the principal agent in gathering the founding group. He was a convert, formerly the Episcopal Bishop of North Carolina. He resided in Manhattanville, was a good friend of Brother Patrick Murphy, and first head of the Board of Trustees of Manhattan College. He also taught at St. Joseph's Seminary and at St. John's College (Fordham University).

<sup>5</sup> The Protectory provided the children with the usual academic subjects and trained them in a great many trades: "printing, stereotyping, tailoring, shoemaking, baking, carpentering, blacksmithing, chair-caning, the business of wheelwright and machinist, and farming and gardening..." *A Short Sketch*, op.cit., p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy J. Meagher, editor, *From Paddy to Studs: Irish American Communities in the Turn of the Century, 1880-1920* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 130.

<sup>7</sup> Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> Manhattan College Catalogue, 1864-1865, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Brother Augustine Philip Nelan, "History of the Sisters' Division, 1928-1957." Manuscript in Manhattan College Archives, p. 1. Also Brother Gabriel Costello, *The Arches of the Years*, (Riverdale, New York: Manhattan College, 1980). The Middle States Association, the accrediting agency, forced the closing of the Extension Division, demanding that courses be given on the Manhattan College campus. There was no room for such an arrangement. It was at this time that "The Sister Formation Movement, led by the Sisters-today they would be considered quite conservative-who were determined that Roman Catholic Sisters get first-class education at the best universities [was founded]...they wanted them to get very good undergraduate and graduate education." Linda Brandi Cateura, *Catholics U.S.A.: Makers of a Modern Church.* (New York: William Morrow, 1989), p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew M. Greeley, *The American Catholics: A Social Portrait.* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 26, 41, 46-47, 61, 63, et passim.