

# Church Influence on Community Life in Highbridge

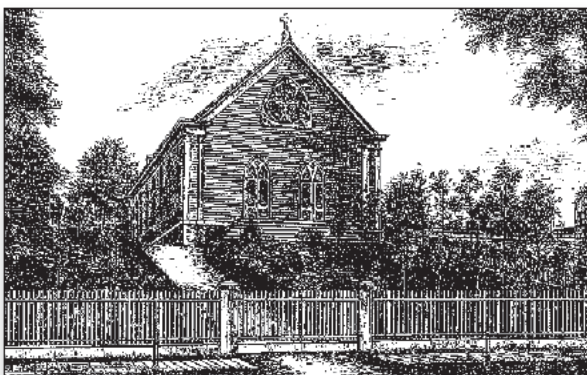
BY KATE FEIGHERY

In New York City during the twentieth century, the Catholic church was often the heart of an Irish neighborhood. However, the physical building of parishes was no longer the sole goal; churches were increasing their sphere of influence into people's personal lives—positioning themselves at the center of not just religious life, but also social, recreational, and educational lives as well.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the 1920s, the Irish parish entered a “golden age”—no longer just a church, the parish was fully realized as the vital social institution of the neighborhood.<sup>2</sup> In addition to celebrations centered around religious holidays, holy days, weddings, communions, and confirmations, the church also organized dances, picnics, bazaars, sporting events, and plays.<sup>3</sup> Parishes established networks designed to, as one priest put it, “meet every need of the parishioner and to deal with every condition.”<sup>4</sup> The experience of the parishioners of Sacred Heart Church, in the Highbridge section of the Bronx, in the twentieth century is a perfect example of this merging of religious and social life. Between the church, school, rectory, and other buildings, Sacred Heart took up one square city block, and was the go-to place for much of the parish's social and community, as well as religious, life.<sup>5</sup> The peal of the church bells, which could be heard throughout the neighborhood, and the site of the steeple cross provided Highbridge's Irish residents with a constant reminder of the presence of the church in their lives. The fact that parishioners had both their social and their religious needs met

by one singular institution gave the church an enormous amount of power and influence over the lives of its parishioners, but in return the Irish and Irish-American parishioners received vital assistance on assimilating to a new life in a new country.

## THE BUILDING OF SACRED HEART

Sacred Heart in Highbridge was one of three new Catholic parishes created in the Bronx in 1875,



and for almost the entire first century of its existence, the parish had a strong Irish presence.<sup>6</sup> When first founded by Reverend James A. Mullen, the parish did not have an actual church building to call home. Instead, masses were held in Daly's Hall, on

the corner of 165th Street and Summit Avenue. Soon, however, the parish was able to raise money for their own church building, and Mullen purchased a wooden chapel that had belonged to St. Rose of Lima in Manhattan, disassembled it, and moved it to Highbridge, where it was dedicated by Cardinal McCloskey on October 21, 1877.<sup>7</sup> At this time, the Bronx was still mostly rural, as seen by the undeveloped land of trees and dirt hills that surrounded the church.

Like many Catholic parishes throughout New York City at the time, Sacred Heart was made up of mostly first- and second-generation immigrants, the majority of whom were of Irish descent. Most of the parishioners, as well as the rest of the neighborhood residents, were working-class, and the rapid expansion that Sacred Heart was able to undertake speaks to the dedication the parishioners felt to their church.

## Illustration:

*An artist's rendering of the first Sacred Heart church building in Highbridge. The building was originally located in St. Rose of Lima parish in Manhattan. It was disassembled and re-constructed in Highbridge to serve the growing population in the 1870s. Courtesy of Bronx Catholic. Blogspot.com.*

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According to Jay Dolan, “a study done of parish finances in New York in the 1880–1920 period concluded that ‘about half the parish income typically came from the dimes and nickels collected as seat money at mass, with most of the rest coming from special collections and parish fairs, and only relatively small proportions from large donations by wealthy individuals.’”<sup>8</sup> Catholic immigrant churches based their fundraising model on the story of the widow’s mite from the Gospel of Saint Mark. In this story, the elderly widow who sacrificed a small amount that was hard for her to come by was more blessed than the richer people who gave large amounts they would not miss,<sup>9</sup> a message parish priests passed along to their congregation. Sacred Heart’s parishioners took the message to heart—although many could only give a small amount, the important part was that they contributed this amount consistently and dependably.<sup>10</sup>

As both the Bronx on a larger scale and the neighborhood of Highbridge in particular underwent immense growth from the 1890s through the 1910s, the number of parishioners that flocked to Sacred Heart quickly outpaced the church’s ability to accommodate them, and soon Father Mullen’s building needed to be replaced with a larger structure. The construction of this new church is a good example of what could be achieved with Irish working-class savings. According to the history of the parish published on the occasion of its Golden Jubilee in 1925, the people who built the parish were “few [in number], poor in this world’s goods, but rich in faith.”<sup>11</sup> By 1910, Sacred Heart was one of the most prosperous parishes in the Bronx and had raised enough money to replace its old wooden chapel with a “Dorset marble structure”<sup>12</sup> adorned with numerous elaborate stained glass windows, all created as a result of memoriam denotations from parishioners.<sup>13</sup>

By 1943, the parish of the Sacred Heart had yet again outgrown its new church. When the Episcopal Church of St. Albans, on Summit Avenue between 162nd and 164th Streets in southern Highbridge, went up for sale in June 1943, Monsignor William Humphrey (pastor of Sacred Heart, 1934–1965) purchased the church and renovated it to serve as an annex chapel for



the parish, to make church attendance more convenient for the residents in the southern part of the neighborhood. St. Eugene’s Chapel opened in the fall of 1943, as did its school, with an enrollment of 215 students.<sup>14</sup> The expense of opening a second chapel was soon justified, as the masses there were quickly just as crowded as the ones at Sacred Heart.

#### THE GROWTH AND INFLUENCE OF SACRED HEART SCHOOL

While the church was a major presence in the lives of the adults in Highbridge, for children Sacred Heart School had even more influence. Construction of a parish school was first begun in 1925, with the blessing of Cardinal Hayes, who authorized up to \$300,000 for the project. However, before any money was promised from the Archdiocese of New York, the people of the parish had already raised over \$100,000 for the new building.<sup>15</sup> Father John Lennon, Sacred Heart’s pastor at the time, thought that the church could do even better than that, and

#### Photo:

*Continuing strong growth and support in Sacred Heart parish contributed to raising enough funds by 1910 for construction of a more substantial marble church building which still stands today. By this time, Sacred Heart had become one of the most prosperous parishes in the Bronx.*

*Courtesy of  
Kate Feighery.*



proposed a campaign to raise another \$150,000, telling his parishioners:

*There is hardly a need to urge upon anyone the necessity of the sacrifice when all have shown themselves ready and willing to make it. But it should be by ALL. Not some, but ALL. I feel we can count on the co-operation of the ninety and nine, but if in every hundred there be even one who is indifferent let this appeal for perfect unity be personal to him or her.*<sup>16</sup>

The school opened in 1926, with 400 students enrolled. The Sisters of Mercy oversaw the girls' education, as well as that of boys up to third grade, at which point the De La Salle Brothers took over their education.<sup>17</sup> After 1943, St. Eugene's also held classes for boys and girls in the first and second grades who lived in southern Highbridge.<sup>18</sup> By 1948, Sacred Heart School had almost 2,000 students enrolled in a building built to accommodate 800, and was so overcrowded that the administration enacted a "split sessions" policy, where half the children would attend in the morning and the other half in the afternoon.<sup>19</sup> To solve the issue of overcrowding, a new school was built in the late 1940s. The new building had eighteen rooms, each accommodating fifty students, which would allow the school to go back to a full day schedule.<sup>20</sup> The faculty was also expanded, with a total of twenty-five Sisters of Charity, eleven De La Salle Brothers, and eleven lay associates.<sup>21</sup>

Both the Sisters of Charity and the De La Salle Brothers had a large presence in parochial schools in New York City. The Irish and Irish-American heritage of the De La Salle Brothers is often attributed to their success in the parochial schools because it helped them to identify with their students and assist them on their path to assimilation.<sup>22</sup> The influence the religious teachers had over the students of Sacred Heart can be seen in the immense number of vocations to these orders coming from the parish. Brother Edmund Dwyer, a De La Salle Brother who taught at Sacred Heart in the late 1940s, recalls that many of his students later took vows in various religious orders; one family in particular had three boys take vows.<sup>23</sup> In a 1958 letter



to the head of the De La Salle provincialate, Sacred Heart's Monsignor Humphrey wrote:

*Of the thirty-eight boys who received the Habit at Barrytown [the De La Salle Brother's high school in upstate New York] last Sunday, I have noticed with delight, that six of them are from Sacred Heart Parish. This is in keeping with the grand record of Sacred Heart Graduates entering your Community. . . .*<sup>24</sup>

The Brothers at the school sent an annual report back to their main office, which included tallies of the vocations that the boys' school had each year. In 1946, the first year recorded, there were nine vocations, and by 1948, there were seventeen boys from Sacred Heart Parish studying at Barrytown, which was the highest number from any single school. The Brothers credited the high numbers of vocations to "the outstanding success in studies, as well as the thoroughly religious spirit pervading our school due in large measure to the good example of the Brothers. . . ."<sup>25</sup>

Many parents felt that the education their children received in the parochial school was better than that of the local public school, with the bonus of Catholic doctrine, as can be seen by the huge enrollment numbers.<sup>26</sup> But there was also pressure from the church for "good Catholics" to educate their children in the parish school.<sup>27</sup> In the October 1958 *Parish Monthly* the editors rebuked parents who did not send their children to Sacred Heart:

*...But we still have some fathers and*

**Photo:**

*To meet the needs of the still-growing parish, in 1943 Monsignor William Humphrey arranged for purchase of a former Episcopal church building on Ogden Avenue, which became St. Eugene's Chapel. It was renovated and dedicated later that year. Courtesy of Kate Feighery.*



*mothers (who incidentally are very poor Catholics) who will not send their children to our Catholic School. Pray for these poor people and for their children. For their children will not have good example at home and the parents will have to give a frightening account for them on the Judgement [sic] Day.<sup>28</sup>*

**Photo (top):**

*Altar boys at Sacred Heart during the 1960s. The parish and its teaching orders like the Sisters of Mercy and the De La Salle Brothers exerted a strong influence on its children.*

*During the early and mid-twentieth century, a relatively large number of religious vocations came from the parish.*

*Courtesy of Kate Feighery.*

**Photo:**

*Some sources of influence for Sacred Heart were the sports programs and other activities for children in Highbridge. A single evening (like "Sports Night") could see a variety parish-sponsored games and contests, as shown in these photos from the Sacred Heart Crusader, the school newspaper. Courtesy of Kate Feighery.*

#### THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

For both children and adults in the parish, the church had a huge influence on their social lives outside of religious events. Parish bulletins from the time show extensive lists of ladies auxiliaries, youth groups, mothers' clubs, fraternal organizations, choirs, scouts, and sports teams which were open to all.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, priests probably saw opportunities to alleviate the monotony of everyday life by offering a wide variety of parish entertainments, from plays to card parties.<sup>30</sup> When the parish was building its new school in the late 1940s, the builders added a playground on the roof and also one in the basement, so even if the weather was bad the children would have some place to go.<sup>31</sup> A new parish community center was also built at this time, as the priests acknowledged that "in modern city conditions the tendency is to utilize the school building more and more as a centre [sic] for the community activities of the adult population."<sup>32</sup> The new center had an auditorium with seating for 1,000 people, along with a "fireproof room enclosing the apparatus for projection of moving pictures."<sup>33</sup> In 1945, the parish renovated the gym in the hopes that it

would become a "hub around which a great deal of parish activity will revolve, both for the young and old parishioners." It arranged for a complete athletic program to "attract our returning servicemen in particular."<sup>34</sup>

As the day-to-day lives of parishioners and priests became more and more intertwined, parish priests increasingly felt as though they had the right to regulate their parishioners' lives outside of religious activity. Monsignor Humphrey, pastor of Sacred Heart for much of the mid-twentieth century, was especially vocal about his parishioner's lives outside of church. In June of 1962, Monsignor Humphrey used the *Parish Monthly* to address the problem of what he felt was sub-par housekeeping by some of the women in his flock. Under the title, "Sloppy House Keepers," he wrote:

*We are still receiving many complaints about the sloppy housekeepers on Woodycrest and Shakespeare Avenues in the vicinity of 168th Street. It jars the nerves of many people to see bedclothes being placed on the sills of windows and left there for the greater part of the day. Also it seems shocking to see people shaking rugs and table cloths out the window. While we notice these things and continue to hear complaints, we feel it should be brought to the attention of the owners of these houses.<sup>35</sup>*

Another target of Humphrey's ire were those



who skipped Sunday mass. The mass schedule of Sacred Heart during this time was impressive: The *Parish Monthly* for June 1961 showed the





schedule of Masses on Sunday as follows; in the Church: 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 12:45; in the Auditorium: 8, 9, and 12:15 and in the Chapel (St. Eugene's) 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 12:45 for a total of 18 masses"<sup>36</sup> The *Parish Monthly* in May of 1952 included a special section titled "Miss Mass," which reminded parents that "there is a very strict obligation binding in conscience... to make sure that the vacation will be spent in the vicinity of a Catholic Church.... A little more thought and better planning would be more pleasing to God."<sup>37</sup> This omniscient role of the religious members of the community was not uncommon in Catholic parishes at the time. According to Robert Cross, priests were not as concerned with being "innovators in theological speculation" as they were with "being *available* to the immigrants, in bad times as well as good."<sup>38</sup>

As the ties between the parishioners and their parish grew, people began to privilege religious territory over geography, identifying with the parish rather than the neighborhood. Margaret Ginty, a Highbridge resident, remembers that when she first met new people, and they asked where she was from, she would always say "Sacred Heart," not Highbridge.<sup>39</sup> The church defined, for many, their identity. Pat Lorello, when reflecting on her family's several residence changes when she was young, remembers that, no matter where they moved, "Of course, we had to stay in the parish, because back then, no one changed parishes on purpose."<sup>40</sup> The parish became personal—friends and fam-

ily were there, entertainment was there, and most major events of the life cycle, from birth to death, were associated with it. Margaret Ginty remembers Sacred Heart as a major part of her life growing up in the 1940s and 50s. If she or her brothers or sisters misbehaved, her mother would threaten to "send them to public school." This was the ultimate threat because attending public school would cut the kids off from more than just education—it would also cut them off from the social events of the neighborhood.<sup>41</sup> The priests played important roles in facilitating the connections between the people and their parish.<sup>42</sup>

#### THE CHURCH AND THE "AMERICANIZATION" OF IMMIGRANTS

While all of this interconnectivity between the parishioners and the religious of the parish might, in retrospect, be hard to understand, it actually served an important function for Highbridge's immigrant, working-class residents. The local, urban, ethnic parish church played an important role in "Americanizing" immigrants and their children. For many of the first- and second-generations, the urban church served as a stopping point on the way to middle-class suburbia, sometimes for just a few years, other times for a few generations. As Thomas Shelley points out, although Catholic immigrants "were eager to assimilate into American society, grateful to enjoy the liberty and economic opportunity often denied them in their homeland," the Catholic

**Photo:**  
Priests in Sacred Heart played a crucial role in sustaining connections between parishioners and their church. Beginning in 1934, Monsignor William Humphrey (center, bottom row) was an important figure in expanding parish resources to meet parishioners' needs. Courtesy of Kate Feighery.



Church “enabled them to assimilate to some degree on their own terms, without sacrificing either their religious faith or their ethnic heritage.”<sup>43</sup> Humphrey, like some other urban parish priests at the time, believed this was his way of assisting his Irish parishioners along the road to assimilation.<sup>44</sup> By ensuring that they did not engage in activities that would hinder, rather than help, their progress toward Americanization and the middle-class, Humphrey was highlighting positive images of the Irish.<sup>45</sup> In the parish, through formal interaction with church institutions, as well as informal interactions with fellow parishioners, the teachers in the school, and the parish priest, the immigrants could learn how to exchange their old country ways for ones that were more acceptable to life in America.<sup>46</sup> As Highbridge native Jim Flanagan recalls, the parish “school took their children, corrected the Irish brogues they brought from home, and taught them of a new country and a wider world.”<sup>47</sup>

Looking back on this interconnectivity between the parish and its parishioners may seem odd to us today, but the important role that the church played in the lives of Highbridge’s Catholic residents cannot be understated. For many working-class Irish immigrants, the church was the bedrock on which to build their new lives in America, and it offered them something that was connected to both their lives back home in Ireland and their new lives in America. The experiences of Irish immigrants in neighborhoods like Highbridge allowed these people to create new lives for themselves on their own terms, surrounded by people that were welcoming and familiar. They took ownership of the process of becoming an “Irish-American,” and were proud of what they achieved through vibrant social communities that maintained familial and religious connections. The power of nostalgia for the

life they formed in such urban neighborhoods is ensuring that that Irish presence remains a vital part of the historical memory of modern New York City.

## Endnotes

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**Photo:**  
Traditional Irish dancing at Sacred Heart, with appropriate costume, reflected the influence of Irish culture in the Highbridge parish well into the twentieth century.  
Courtesy of  
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