

"Dagger John" (1797-1864)

Bishop John Hughes — 4th Bishop and 1st Archbishop of New York

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"In New York no one had to ask who ruled the Church. John Hughes was boss. He ruled like an Irish Chieftain."¹

Throughout the 1800's, New York City saw the arrival of millions of immigrants. Many of these immigrants had fled poverty and persecution in Ireland, and their story is inseparable from that of John Joseph Hughes, the Irish-born bishop who championed the rights of the Irish in old New York. John Hughes gained notoriety for his willingness to do battle with anyone or any organization who threatened the Catholic Church or the Irish. With the help of his forceful, energetic character, Hughes managed to raise the prestige of the Church and the living conditions of the Irish. Hughes had to overcome anti-Catholicism, poverty, and ignorance, and he did not do so diplomatically. This bishop was a fighter who was blunt and argumentative and was once described as

"more a Roman gladiator than a devout follower of the meek founder of Christianity."² His nickname of "Dagger John" referred not only to the cross he drew after his signature; it also meant he was a man one did not cross lightly.

Hughes' fierce determination to combat injustice and ignorance in America had its roots in his native land of Ireland. John Joseph Hughes was born June 24, 1797, in County Tyrone, Ireland. England ruled Ireland, and that meant that Catholics were second-class citizens. Catholics could not own homes worth more than 5 pounds nor could they join the army or navy. They could not operate schools or give their children a Catholic education. A defining moment for the young Hughes occurred when he was fifteen and his younger sister was being buried. Since the priest was forbidden by English law from entering the cemetery, all he could do was bless a handful of dirt and give it to Hughes to sprinkle on the grave. What sort of future was there in such a land?

Later in life, Hughes would comment that he dreamed of "a country in which no stigma of inferiority would be impressed on my brow, simply because I professed one creed or another."¹³

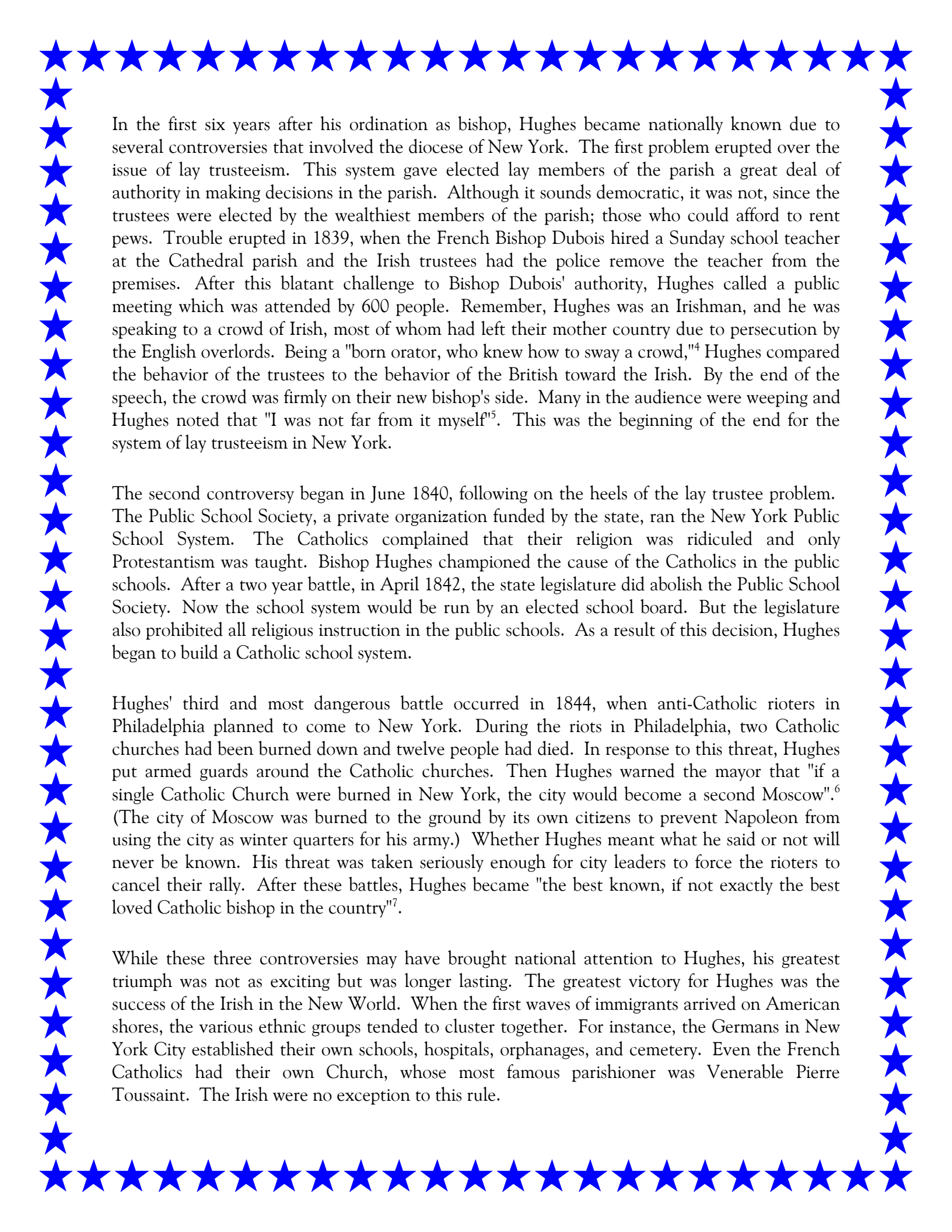
Seeking a better life, the Hughes family came to America in 1817. At the age of twenty and lacking an education, Hughes found work as a gardener and stonemason at Mount St. Mary's College and Seminary in Emmitsburg, MD. The young man had dreamed of being a priest, so he asked Father John Dubois, the rector (head) of the seminary for entrance. Father Dubois, seeing only an uneducated gardener, refused. It was only after Mother Elizabeth Seton (America's first native born Saint) interceded for Hughes that Dubois relented. Hughes began his seminary training in September 1820, and was ordained a priest in 1826. His first assignment was in Philadelphia.

Unfortunately, the "city of brotherly love", was lacking that love when it came to the Catholic population. Here, Hughes came face to face with anti-Catholic prejudice. As the 18th century had progressed, more Irish Catholics had arrived in America. Being unskilled and uneducated, the condition of the Irish in America was becoming what it had been in Ireland. The Irish were regarded and treated as second-class citizens. Hughes fought back; writing frequently to newspapers, insisting that America was for all people, not just Protestants and the educated. The Irish he defended came to love this priest, and his stature grew when he publicly debated a prominent Protestant clergyman. This notoriety brought him to the attention of Rome who saw Hughes as the best candidate to assist Bishop John Dubois as bishop of New York.

Bishop John Dubois, the former seminary rector who had only grudgingly admitted John Hughes to the seminary was now sick, elderly and being French, not very popular with the predominantly Irish Catholics of New York. John Hughes arrived in New York City when he was forty-one years old and had been a priest for only eleven years. He was ordained as coadjutor bishop in 1838, so when Dubois died in 1842, Hughes automatically became bishop of New York. The diocese Hughes ran was much larger than it is today. When the diocese was established in 1808, it included all of New York State and the northern part of New Jersey, about 55,000 square miles. At the time of Hughes' consecration as bishop, the diocese had 200,000 Catholics, but only thirty-eight churches and fifty priests. Still, the immigrants came. By 1850, New York was America's largest city, and in recognition of the city's growth and importance, Pope Pius IX made it an archdiocese and John Hughes became its first archbishop.



Old St. Patrick's Cathedral

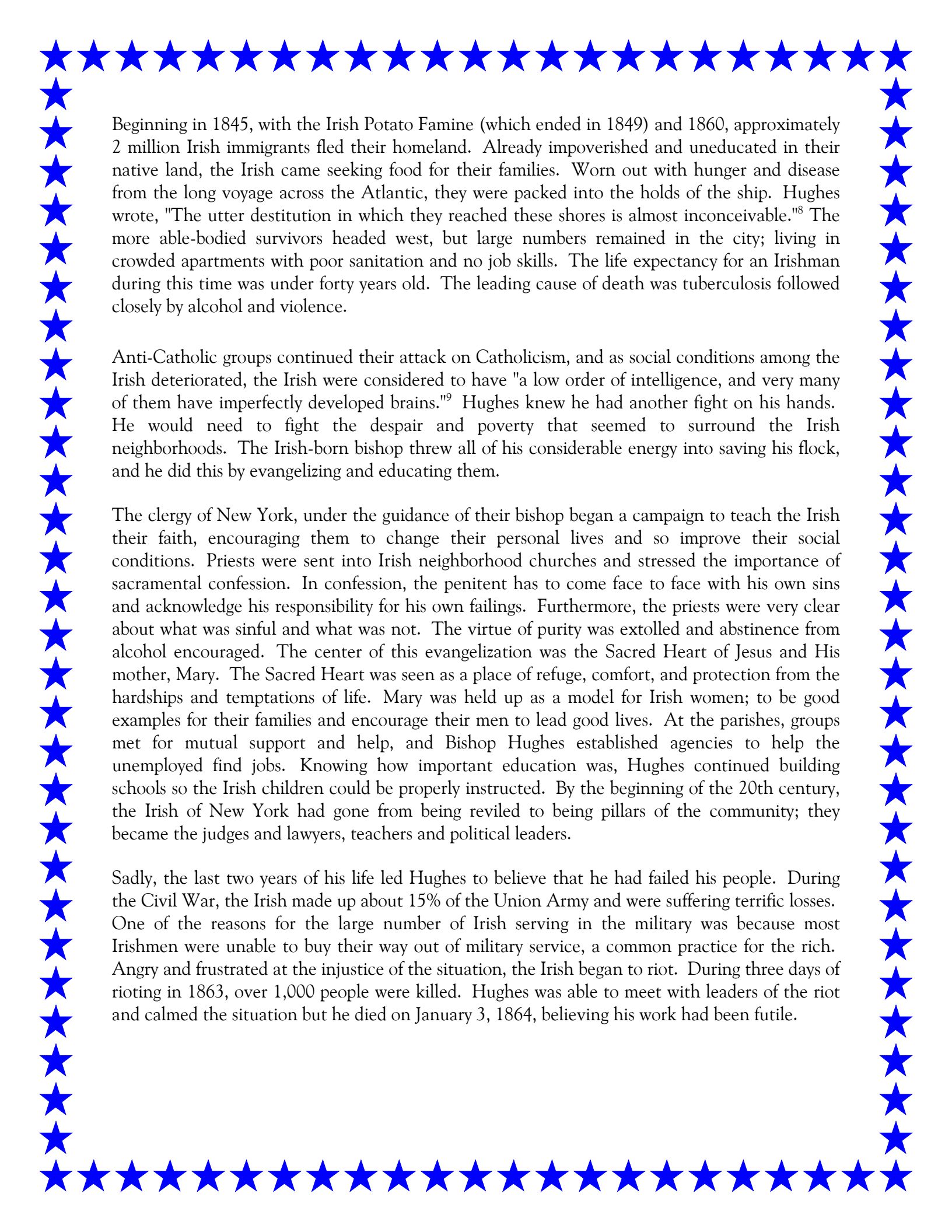


In the first six years after his ordination as bishop, Hughes became nationally known due to several controversies that involved the diocese of New York. The first problem erupted over the issue of lay trusteeism. This system gave elected lay members of the parish a great deal of authority in making decisions in the parish. Although it sounds democratic, it was not, since the trustees were elected by the wealthiest members of the parish; those who could afford to rent pews. Trouble erupted in 1839, when the French Bishop Dubois hired a Sunday school teacher at the Cathedral parish and the Irish trustees had the police remove the teacher from the premises. After this blatant challenge to Bishop Dubois' authority, Hughes called a public meeting which was attended by 600 people. Remember, Hughes was an Irishman, and he was speaking to a crowd of Irish, most of whom had left their mother country due to persecution by the English overlords. Being a "born orator, who knew how to sway a crowd,"⁴ Hughes compared the behavior of the trustees to the behavior of the British toward the Irish. By the end of the speech, the crowd was firmly on their new bishop's side. Many in the audience were weeping and Hughes noted that "I was not far from it myself"⁵. This was the beginning of the end for the system of lay trusteeism in New York.

The second controversy began in June 1840, following on the heels of the lay trustee problem. The Public School Society, a private organization funded by the state, ran the New York Public School System. The Catholics complained that their religion was ridiculed and only Protestantism was taught. Bishop Hughes championed the cause of the Catholics in the public schools. After a two year battle, in April 1842, the state legislature did abolish the Public School Society. Now the school system would be run by an elected school board. But the legislature also prohibited all religious instruction in the public schools. As a result of this decision, Hughes began to build a Catholic school system.

Hughes' third and most dangerous battle occurred in 1844, when anti-Catholic rioters in Philadelphia planned to come to New York. During the riots in Philadelphia, two Catholic churches had been burned down and twelve people had died. In response to this threat, Hughes put armed guards around the Catholic churches. Then Hughes warned the mayor that "if a single Catholic Church were burned in New York, the city would become a second Moscow".⁶ (The city of Moscow was burned to the ground by its own citizens to prevent Napoleon from using the city as winter quarters for his army.) Whether Hughes meant what he said or not will never be known. His threat was taken seriously enough for city leaders to force the rioters to cancel their rally. After these battles, Hughes became "the best known, if not exactly the best loved Catholic bishop in the country"⁷.

While these three controversies may have brought national attention to Hughes, his greatest triumph was not as exciting but was longer lasting. The greatest victory for Hughes was the success of the Irish in the New World. When the first waves of immigrants arrived on American shores, the various ethnic groups tended to cluster together. For instance, the Germans in New York City established their own schools, hospitals, orphanages, and cemetery. Even the French Catholics had their own Church, whose most famous parishioner was Venerable Pierre Toussaint. The Irish were no exception to this rule.



Beginning in 1845, with the Irish Potato Famine (which ended in 1849) and 1860, approximately 2 million Irish immigrants fled their homeland. Already impoverished and uneducated in their native land, the Irish came seeking food for their families. Worn out with hunger and disease from the long voyage across the Atlantic, they were packed into the holds of the ship. Hughes wrote, "The utter destitution in which they reached these shores is almost inconceivable."⁸ The more able-bodied survivors headed west, but large numbers remained in the city; living in crowded apartments with poor sanitation and no job skills. The life expectancy for an Irishman during this time was under forty years old. The leading cause of death was tuberculosis followed closely by alcohol and violence.

Anti-Catholic groups continued their attack on Catholicism, and as social conditions among the Irish deteriorated, the Irish were considered to have "a low order of intelligence, and very many of them have imperfectly developed brains."⁹ Hughes knew he had another fight on his hands. He would need to fight the despair and poverty that seemed to surround the Irish neighborhoods. The Irish-born bishop threw all of his considerable energy into saving his flock, and he did this by evangelizing and educating them.

The clergy of New York, under the guidance of their bishop began a campaign to teach the Irish their faith, encouraging them to change their personal lives and so improve their social conditions. Priests were sent into Irish neighborhood churches and stressed the importance of sacramental confession. In confession, the penitent has to come face to face with his own sins and acknowledge his responsibility for his own failings. Furthermore, the priests were very clear about what was sinful and what was not. The virtue of purity was extolled and abstinence from alcohol encouraged. The center of this evangelization was the Sacred Heart of Jesus and His mother, Mary. The Sacred Heart was seen as a place of refuge, comfort, and protection from the hardships and temptations of life. Mary was held up as a model for Irish women; to be good examples for their families and encourage their men to lead good lives. At the parishes, groups met for mutual support and help, and Bishop Hughes established agencies to help the unemployed find jobs. Knowing how important education was, Hughes continued building schools so the Irish children could be properly instructed. By the beginning of the 20th century, the Irish of New York had gone from being reviled to being pillars of the community; they became the judges and lawyers, teachers and political leaders.

Sadly, the last two years of his life led Hughes to believe that he had failed his people. During the Civil War, the Irish made up about 15% of the Union Army and were suffering terrific losses. One of the reasons for the large number of Irish serving in the military was because most Irishmen were unable to buy their way out of military service, a common practice for the rich. Angry and frustrated at the injustice of the situation, the Irish began to riot. During three days of rioting in 1863, over 1,000 people were killed. Hughes was able to meet with leaders of the riot and calmed the situation but he died on January 3, 1864, believing his work had been futile.

History tells another story. By the time of Hughes' death, there were 100 Catholic schools. Churches and schools multiplied as well as hospitals and orphanages. The bishop founded St. John's College which developed into Fordham University. He was also instrumental in bringing



several religious communities to his diocese to staff these new institutions. In 1858, he blessed the cornerstone for the new St. Patrick's Cathedral; a sign to show the city and the nation that the Irish were a people whose time had come.

Archbishop Hughes blesses the cornerstone of the new cathedral on Fifth Avenue August 15, 1858

John Hughes was and will always be a controversial figure. Someone who was once described as "a tyrant, but with feeling"¹⁰ will always have his detractors. People may applaud his success while questioning the way he went about achieving his goals. While he had obvious character faults, John Hughes was ultimately successful because he never forgot where he came from. He understood the struggles of his fellow Irish because he had lived through them, and they in turn supported and loved him. In an often hostile environment, Hughes was aggressive and tactless, but in the end, he gained the respect of those who opposed him and brought prestige and honor to the Catholic Church in America and to all Irish-Americans.

FOOTNOTES:

- 1: Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics 1815-1865*, quoted in William J. Stern, "How Dagger John Saved New York's Irish," *Urbanites* 7, no.2 (Spring 1997): 1
- 2: Stern, 1.
- 3: Stern, 1.
- 4: Msgr. Thomas J. Shelley, "Archbishop John Hughes and the Church in New York," *CNY Feature Story*.
- 5: Shelley, 4.
- 6: Shelley, 5.
- 7: Shelley, 2.
- 8: Shelley, 5.
- 9: Stern, 5.
- 10: Shelley, 3.