John Joseph Hughes Biography

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Biography

Irish-born American John Joseph Hughes (1797-1864) was the first Catholic archbishop of New York and an outspoken defender of American Catholicism against Protestant attacks.

John Hughes emigrated from Ireland to the United States in 1817. Denied admission to Mount Saint Mary's Seminary, he served as that institution's gardener. After diligent study he finally matriculated as a regular student and in 1826 received ordination. As a young priest in Philadelphia, he soon was embroiled in a dispute over lay trusteeism. Throughout the history of Catholicism the administration of Church property had been the bishop's responsibility; in America, however, laymen claimed the right to manage the Philadelphia Cathedral, as well as the authority to name their own pastor. The clergy's efforts to establish their traditional prerogatives angered Protestants, who regarded the Catholic hierarchy as somehow subversive and the principle of lay control as more consonant with American democracy. Hughes's newspaper debates with Protestant critics soon made him famous.

In 1838 Hughes became coadjutor bishop of New York and the following year was made administrator in his own right. Once again he was involved in an episode of anti-Catholic sentiment--the struggle over the New York City public schools. Hughes objected to the Protestant religious practices required of Catholic students in the supposedly nonsectarian educational system. The ensuing turmoil resulted in complete reorganization of the school system, although Hughes's demand for tax money for parochial schools went unheeded. Soon the Native American party began attacking Hughes for allegedly having driven the Bible out of the classroom.

In 1850 Rome elevated New York to a province and made Hughes its first archbishop. He opposed a bill pending in the state legislature that would prevent bishops from holding Church property in their own name; although the bill passed, the state never enforced it. He also carried the burden of defending his Church against the attacks of the Know-Nothing party, while reflecting the conservatism of New York City in his stand on slavery. He rejected abolition, fearing that African Americans would not be prepared for freedom. But when the South seceded, he remained a staunch unionist. During the Civil War he undertook a diplomatic mission to France for President Abraham Lincoln and, in July 1863, helped New York's governor put down the draft riots. Hughes died on Jan. 3, 1864.