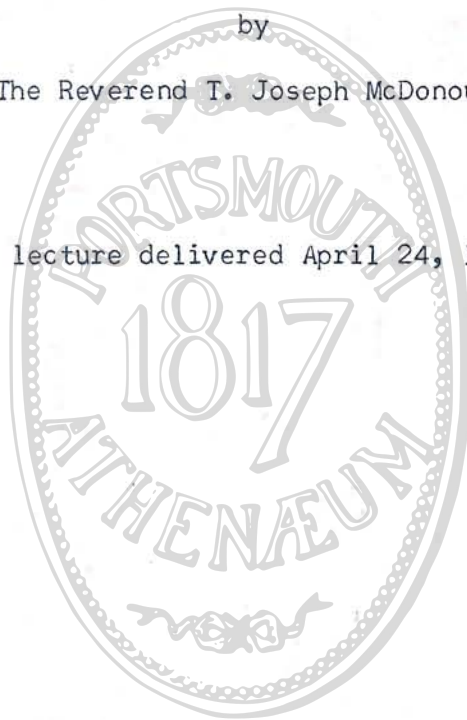


History of the Catholic Church
in Portsmouth

by

The Reverend T. Joseph McDonough

(a lecture delivered April 24, 1968)



Piscataqua History Club
263 Rockland Street
Portsmouth, New Hampshire

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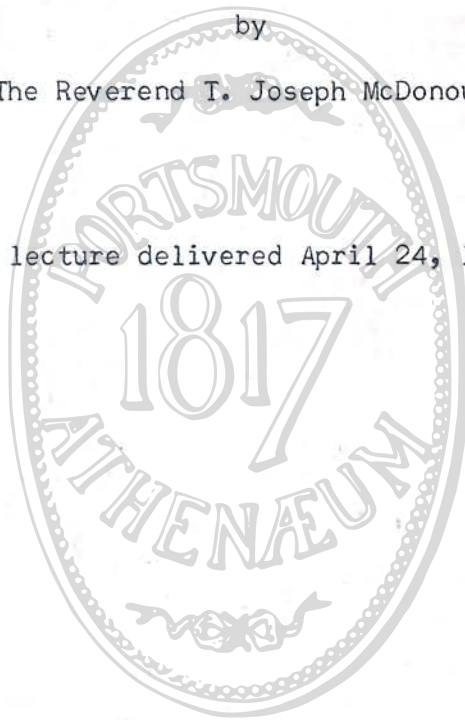
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Officers, ladies and gentlemen and guests of the Piscataqua History Club, I come to you this evening as a novice in the historical growth and development of our own country which is very young. To speak on the historical highlights of a nation that is not yet two hundred years old would seem somewhat of a contradiction as we compare it to the other nations of the world who can boast of centuries of traditions and cultural accomplishments. Yet, next to life it is "time" which is our most priceless commodity. We measure the success or the failure of our individual lives in that short space of time (from birth to death it is allotted to each one of us who lives).

We also measure the history of a community or state or nation on how they evaluate their use of time and this becomes history. I know that you as an organization realize the importance of assessing every aspect of community life here in the Port City with our present day in an attempt to make our mark which will be recorded in future history. Every element of the family life which is the community blends in like a magnificent crescendo to achieve the overall good which should permeate every family and every community. It is our purpose this evening to look back in an attempt to evaluate what part the Catholic members of this community, both as individuals and as members of the family of God, have historically contributed to the overall growth and development of the "Portsmouth family."

In presenting the history of any Church--the Roman Catholic being no exception--we find that it is very tightly knitted with the accomplishments of the pastor at the time and the people with whom he was joined in God's work. In tracing then the gradual growth of the Catholic community in the Portsmouth area, we find that they were identified with those pastors who had been assigned by the Catholic hierarchy. Compared to other denominations, the Roman Catholics had a late start in settling at Strawberry Banke as Portsmouth was first known. Except for the

missionary work that was done by Catholic chaplains travelling with the French and Indian war parties, there was no formal Catholic community in this section of New England. It was not until 1798 that Catholics were first actively heard from in Portsmouth. In that year, the Rev. John Thayer, a convert who has the honor of ^{being} the first New England boy ordained to the priesthood, came to conduct what is believed to have been the first service of Catholic denomination. The exact nature of this service was not known--it was held at the home of John Morrissey, located at the corner of Court and Atkinson Streets. No longer standing today, his residence was known as "The Underwood" house.

With the end of British domination in this country, America became attractive to emigrants. Many of those were Irish Catholics who sought to escape British persecution. The French and Irish influence upon the growth of Catholicism in this country was borne out by the leadership supplied at the turn of the century by Rev. Jean Lewis deCheverus and Father Matignon, the only priests in New England for many years. Father Cheverus became the first Bishop of Massachusetts and his diocese covered all the New England states. A frequent visitor to Portsmouth, it is said that he personally knew every Catholic in his diocese.

By 1836 a total of 34 Catholics in Portsmouth were regularly cared for at a small mission by the Rev. Patrick Canovan of Dover. Father Canovan came to the Portsmouth mission, celebrated Mass, administered other sacraments in the home of Dominic Peduzzi at the corner of Congress and High Streets where the old Mechanic and Traders Bank Building later stood.

By 1835, Catholics numbered 720 in the entire state of New Hampshire, as compared to 254,000 Protestants. The Church really began to grow from this point, spurred by the large waves of Catholics emigrating to this country as a result of the great Irish famine. Consequently, the Catholic faithful in Portsmouth outgrew the use of a private home for services. Captain Frank H. Baker, a devout Catholic

stationed at the Marine Barracks, was instrumental in obtaining the use of the court house on Court Street for activities.

Father Canovan continued to travel from Dover to Portsmouth until the year 1851 when the Rev. Charles McCallion was named the first resident pastor. Now the need for a church building as a central and focal point of their Catholic life was becoming a reality. Assisted by two parish laymen ; the first pastor acquired a prime building site at the corner of Summer and Chatham streets, then known as Circus Field on Mason's Hill. In the spring of 1852, ground was broken for the erection of the first Catholic Church in the Portsmouth community. Since the members of the parish were of the lower income bracket and funds were at a minimum, the men of the parish offered their services voluntarily. On October 8, 1852, the Church having been completed, it was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin under the title of St. Mary's by the Most Rev. John B. Fitzpatrick, D.D., Bishop of Boston.

Father McCallion stayed only three years--just long enough to supervise the construction project before he was replaced by the Rev. John O'Donnell and the Rev. James Donnelly respectively.

The Rev. Patrick Canovan, the younger, succeeded to the pastorate in 1855, and completed the overall project of setting up the parish complex. In 1859, Father Canovan purchased a field at the Plains for a parish cemetery. The Most Rev. David W. Bacon, D.D., Bishop of Portland, Maine, whose office had been created only two years earlier, blessed the land and dedicated the cemetery as St. Mary's cemetery. This today is known as the old St. Mary's which is to the right of the by-pass on Greenland Road where grave markers can be traced back to 1835.

Father Canovan's tenure of office was ended in 1865, being succeeded by the Rev. John Barry who soon moved to become pastor in Concord and later the Vicar General of the new diocese of Manchester. Coming next as pastor was the Rev. Daniel Murphy of Dover. His pastorate saw the ordination to the priesthood of his

brother, the Rev. John Murphy, giving Portsmouth and St. Mary's the honor of being the scene of the first priestly ordination in the state.

The year 1865 was truly a memorable one for Catholics for still another reason. Father Murphy, a visionary man, realized that to make his parish really strong religious education must be started at an early age. To accomplish this, the Church had to provide educational facilities for its young people. Accordingly, Father Murphy negotiated the purchase of the building at 202 State Street as the parish's first parochial school. It was in that same year that five sisters of Mercy came from Manchester as they had been assigned to care for the spiritual and educational upbringing of Portsmouth Catholic youth.

Father Murphy, his mission being accomplished, moved on to Keene four years later, being succeeded by Rev. Thomas E. Walsh of Exeter who within two short years was to find the material work of his predecessors destroyed in smoke and flame. The exact date of this tragic event in the life of this new Portsmouth parish occurred on November 27, 1871. There are many interesting sidelights which drew not only the Catholic community of Portsmouth into a tightly knitted band, but they were joined by many of their non-Catholic friends in the project of replacing the historical wooden structure. Much could be said in the way of local interest as to the manner of the equipment that was available in trying to quench the blaze that threatened the entire neighborhood surrounding the Church. The distraught pastor, Father Walsh, wasted no time and spared no energy in garnering the zeal and the energy of the Catholic faithful in replacing the burnt Church. He erected a new brick edifice on the same location at a cost of \$50,000. During this construction, services were held in the Temple or Music Hall and readily recognized today as the Civic Theater. Finally, on Holy Thursday, April 9, 1874, the Most Rev. David W. Bacon, D.D., Bishop of Portland, dedicated the magnificent new edifice just in time for the traditional Easter Sunday Services.

Parishioners had spared nothing to make the building, renamed the Church of the Immaculate Conception, a splendid citadel of their faith. A Gothic style brick structure dominated by a massive tower and steeple, topped by a gilded cross, the Church held 150 pews made of chestnut and black walnut wood which were capable of seating 900 people. His work done here, Father Walsh was succeeded on October 20, 1875 by the Rev. Eugene M. O'Callaghan, who was to become one of the oldest and most prominent pastors in length of service.

In coming to Portsmouth, Father O'Callaghan faced a \$25,000 mortgage on the new Church. It was not until 1884 that all Church debts were wiped out and that year, too, a new pipe organ was installed and the Stations of the Cross from Munich, Germany were installed. In 1894, the beloved Fr. O'Callaghan observed the silver jubilee of his ordination to the priesthood. Bishop Bradley, the spiritual father of all Catholics in the State of New Hampshire, came to Portsmouth and celebrated the solemn Pontifical Mass for the occasion.

In 1900, certainly a milestone in the history of any community--the turn of a new century--Father O'Callaghan had occasion to mark another silver jubilee, that of his installation as pastor here in Portsmouth. This time he presented the Church with \$10,000, having thoughtfully taken out a 15 year endowment life insurance that had reached maturity. Half this amount was used to purchase stained glass windows which, in fact, presently grace the newer Immaculate Conception Church. Members of the Catholic Community were grieved in 1901 when Father O'Callaghan was transferred to St. John's Church in Concord, New Hampshire.

In January of that year, the Rev. Patrick Finnegan succeeded him to the pastorate. Like his two predecessors, Father Finnegan continued the building project by enlarging and completely remodeling the parish school. Father Finnegan lived to see his dreams and his building program completed before his death on July 14, 1906. He was succeeded in July, 1907 by the Rev. Edward Walsh who served as a pastor for

a period of eight years before succumbing to a heart attack in March, 1915.

Coming to fill his place the following September was the Rev. Daniel A. Sullivan. It was under his spiritual leadership that the custom of holding memorial services at St. Mary's and Calvary cemeteries in honor of the deceased members of the parish was inaugurated on October 22, 1916--a custom still carried out in our present time.

Ground was broken shortly after the Rev. James H. Brennan from Holy Trinity Church, Somersworth, came, and the three story brick structure fronting Summer Street was constructed as a center of parish business and a home for the clergy. Even during the devastating economical depression of the early '30's, the Catholic faithful responded at a cost of great personal sacrifice to answer the need of a new church so sorely needed for the growing Catholic population. In March of 1933, sufficient funds were on hand to warrant the beginning of the actual work so that the demolition of the old Church was begun.

The new edifice occupies the same site as the old--as fine a location as one could look for in Portsmouth. Instead, however, of abutting directly upon the street as did the old building, the new Church sits back 45 feet, thus promoting desirable decorative effects in the foreground.

During the work of demolition and construction, which took one year, daily Mass was celebrated on week days in the school hall and on Sundays for the larger congregation in the Knights of Columbus Hall and in the Portsmouth theatre. The new Church was completed and ready for services--opening its doors for the first time on Easter Sunday, April 1, 1934--and was dedicated less than six months later. It continued to bear the name of the Church of the Immaculate Conception. Like its predecessor, the new Catholic edifice also was of Gothic architect, built of New Hampshire red brick and Indiana limestone with a slate roof. The interior finish in California stucco was set off in Mexican tan on the wall surfaces with a contrasting

French grey used for ornamental fixtures. The main altar--a true work of art--was made of fine Italian marble exquisitely carved. Father O'Callaghan's memory was perpetuated by the transference of the beautiful stained glass windows he had given to the Church 34 years previously. Father Brennan, under whose supervision and leadership the parish had reached great heights, died Christmas Eve, 1944, and was buried in Calvary cemetery.

The war years and the concentrated effort of both the military and civilian personnel at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard left its mark on both the economical and population growth of the seacoast area. The newly appointed pastor in the person of the Rev. James E. McCooey, transferred from St. Bernard's Church in Keene, N. H., assumed his pastoral duties on March 15, 1945. With him came the Rev. Thomas F. Duffy as his assistant, and many will recall Father Duffy's priestly work as a curate for 13 years in the Immaculate Conception and later as the founder of St. James Church in Portsmouth.

With what is oftentimes referred to as population explosion, the new pastor faced many critical situations in answering the spiritual, cultural and educational needs of the Catholic family which had grown beyond the limits of one city parish. Like public school officials, Father McCooey was soon to face crowded parochial school conditions which could only get worse, considering the expected larger enrollments. Finally, in 1949 the present school building was entirely renovated and shortly afterwards a two-story annex was constructed providing four classrooms capable of seating 180 additional students. This alleviated the problem for the moment.

Meanwhile, Catholicism was preparing itself for another real milestone in the history of the church here. In 1951, the Most Reverend Bishop of Manchester announced that a new Church was to be built in this city.

The new Church of the Immaculate Conception, opened scarcely 17 years before, no longer could accomodate all those desiring to worship there. The site for the new church, to be known as St. Catherine's, was to be a plot of land on Woodbury Avenue that was acquired from Ivey Telles and Howard P. Gray. Shortly after the Bishop's announcement, the Rev. Patrick J. Kenneally, a native of Portsmouth, came from St. Joseph's Church in Salem, N. H. to assume the pastorate of the new Church which was formally organized in August of 1951. With Father Kenneally came a taste of local flavor which entwined the lives of many of his ancestors who had been pioneers in the Catholic family of the city of Portsmouth. There are many here who, I am sure, know Father Kenneally personally as he was born and raised in the city of Portsmouth and was educated in the local schools where he made himself felt as a leader, not only in school activities but in the field of sports as well. Like his predecessors, Father Kenneally led the faithful of the new parish as they began by attending Mass at the Colonial theatre during the interim period while their new house of God was being built. With an eye to the changing times and needs of church members, 20 acres of land adjacent to the building site were purchased from Mrs. David R. Smith, for use as a parking lot. With mixed feelings of pride and a knowledge of a job well done, Father Kenneally and his parishioners joined by fellow Catholics from the Immaculate Conception and a sizeable number of Protestants observed as Bishop Brady consecrated the new Church on November 30, 1952.

As a small point of interest, it is interesting to note that the title of St. Catherine's Church bears the name of Father Kenneally's mother, who came to Portsmouth as an emigrant from Ireland to raise a family and leave an indelible mark on the history of Catholicism in the "creek area."

The growth and development of the new segment of the family of God, under the title of St. Catherine of Sienna, is a living tribute of the faith and sacrifice of a present day priest who reaped the harvest for the sacrifices of his ancestors.

Death was once again to make a marked change in the history of the Immaculate Conception parish. Monsignor McCooey went to his eternal reward in 1953. Despite the change of leadership, which brought the Rt. Rev. J. Francis Happney from the Holy Trinity Church in Somersworth as pastor, the Church of the Immaculate Conception continued in its rich heritage of serving the Catholic community in that section of Portsmouth. As he had in all of his previous parishes, the beloved Monsignor has long endeared himself by his simple, priestly charity, not only to the Catholics but to all the people of God in our community.

The most recent chapter in the modern-day history of Catholicism in our area led to the establishment of a third parish in the seacoast area. On May 18, 1958, the parish of St. James the Greater was established by the Most Reverend Matthew F. Brady, D.D., Bishop of Manchester. Its founding pastor was the Rt. Rev. Thomas F. Duffy who had served so long and so faithfully in the mother parish for 13 years with a thorough knowledge of both the people and the needs of suburbia. The parish was to service the people in the southern-most tip of the city of Portsmouth as well as Greenland, Newington and part of Rye. Immediate construction of an impressive colonial Church was begun with the cooperation and the personal sacrifices of some 600 families in the new parish. While the church was under construction, Mass was offered in the auditorium of the new Portsmouth Senior High School. The new St. James was formerly dedicated and consecrated on May 30, 1959 by Bishop Brady. After 5 years in the pastoral service of his parishioners, Father Duffy, as he was so familiarly known to the Portsmouth people, volunteered for missionary work among the peoples of Cartago in Colombia, South America, where he is presently serving.

In the more recent developments as far as the pastoral administration of the three local parishes, I am sure that you are all fully aware of the fact that they are being served by the Rev. Francis J. Curren as pastor of the Immaculate Conception,

Rev. Joseph Shields pastor of St. Catherine's, and yours truly as the administrator of St. James parish.

As it was indicated in our opening remarks, we are all fully aware that historical facts are of no value unless we see them reflected in our present day plans and projected into the future accomplishments of our community as a family. This family concept of which I make such frequent reference is fundamentally our relationship to God as members of His family and to our fellowman as members of a given community. Regardless of what age or what generation in which we live, it is the use of our allotted time and our God-given ability in contributing to the overall good of the family of the community which will be the measure of our success in recorded history. In retrospect then, we can see that the Catholics of this community were vibrant parts of the life building of the growing Portsmouth community. We in our time must draw from their strength of faith, their love of their fellowman, and their sense of self-dedication in making their individual contributions in the growing life of a wonderful "Port City" whose heritage and tradition are rich in the accomplishments of God through man.

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