PROJECT MUSE®

*Two Centuries of Faith: The Influence of Catholicism on
Boston, 1808–2008* (review)

John F. Quinn

The Catholic Historical Review, Volume 96, Number 1, January 2010,
pp. 171–173 (Review)

Published by The Catholic University of America Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cat.0.0599>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/369500>

Two Centuries of Faith: The Influence of Catholicism on Boston, 1808–2008.

Edited by Thomas H. O'Connor. [The Boston College Church in the 21st Century Series.] (New York: Herder and Herder/Crossroad Publishing Company. 2009. Pp. vi, 336. \$39.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-824-52531-6.)

For those Catholics despairing over the current state of the Church in Boston, this book offers some welcome historical perspective. Edited by Thomas H. O'Connor, who is a leading authority on Catholic Boston, the volume includes contributions from well-known authors such as J. Bryan Hehir and James O'Toole, and younger scholars such as William Leonard and Elizabeth Bischof. Taken together, these well-written essays give readers a clear sense of the challenges that the Church has faced in Boston over the past two centuries.

William Schmidt notes that eighteenth-century Massachusetts was so anti-Catholic that priests were forbidden by law from entering the colony. Repeat offenders would be subject to the death penalty. After France's involvement in the American Revolution, however, Catholicism was viewed in a much more positive light throughout the United States. Public Masses were celebrated in Boston in 1788, and in the years following, a couple of French émigré priests tended to the small group of Catholics in and around Boston.

In 1808 when Jean Cheverus was appointed Boston's first bishop, he was given jurisdiction over the six New England states and was assisted by two priests. Well regarded by Protestants and Catholics alike, Cheverus was recalled to France in 1823 to the disappointment of many in Boston. Two years later, a Maryland Jesuit, Benedict Fenwick, arrived to succeed Cheverus. Eager to raise the Church's profile, Fenwick moved the Ursuline Sisters out of their cramped quarters in Boston to a grand estate in Charlestown. Six years after the move, nativists torched the Ursuline convent and school. Fenwick's successor, John Fitzpatrick, also had to contend with nativists. In 1854 the Know Nothings gained control of the government and set up a Nunnery Committee to investigate all the convents in the state. Fortunately for Fitzpatrick and Boston's Catholics, the Know Nothings were soon voted out of office.

Much of Fitzpatrick's energies were devoted to the tens of thousands of Irish immigrants who came to Boston during the Potato Famine years. New churches, schools, hospitals, and orphanages were established to care for the Irish. As the state's population swelled, the other New England states were split off from the diocese.

Under Fitzpatrick's successor, John Williams, Boston—an archdiocese after 1875—continued to grow at a rapid rate. As the Irish became increasingly influential in Boston, new waves of Catholics entered the state: French Canadians, Italians, Poles, Lithuanians, and Portuguese. By 1900, Boston's Catholic population was quite diverse.

In 1908, as the archdiocese celebrated its centennial, church leaders had good reasons to feel satisfied. An Irish American and future grandfather of President John F. Kennedy, John "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald, was serving as mayor, and dozens of impressive church complexes had been established throughout the state. The new Roman-trained archbishop, William O'Connell, triumphantly declared, "The Puritan has passed; the Catholic remains" (p. 32). O'Connell would be appointed Boston's first cardinal in 1911 and would reign until his death in 1944. Any readers inclined to view the O'Connell era as a golden age will be disabused by the contributors. The essayists depict O'Connell as an arrogant leader who sought to control Catholic writers and journalists as well as the clergy and religious sisters and brothers. At the same time, he provided no oversight to his nephew, Monsignor James O'Connell, who embezzled money from the archdiocese to support a woman he had secretly married.

The contributors are generally kinder to Cardinal Richard Cushing, O'Connell's personable successor from South Boston. O'Toole notes, however, that Cushing spent money very freely and did not scrutinize his seminarians with much care. Many of the archdiocese's sexually abusive priests were ordained during the Cushing years. When Cushing's Azorean-born successor, Cardinal Humberto Medeiros, arrived in Boston, he inherited an \$80 million deficit. Worse yet, Medeiros came to Boston just as racial tensions were intensifying. When a federal judge ordered busing to integrate Boston's public schools, Medeiros strongly endorsed the ruling, which infuriated many Irish Catholics in the city.

When Cardinal Bernard Law arrived in Boston in 1984, he continued Medeiros's practice of speaking out on controversial issues. In 1986 Law supported a referendum to cut off government funding for abortions and another to provide public funding for parochial schools. Massachusetts' voters rejected both measures resoundingly, a clear indication of the Church's weakened state. None of the authors dwell on Law's role in the sexual abuse crisis; perhaps they assumed that this topic is familiar to everyone.

Since coming to Boston in 2003, Cardinal Séan O'Malley, O.F.M. Cap., has sought to bring some measure of resolution to the crisis. He faces a myriad of other challenges as well. The Church continues to lose members; at present, less than 25 percent of Boston's Catholics are practicing their faith. The faithful who remain are quite a diverse lot: Leonard notes that there are now sizable numbers of Brazilians, Puerto Ricans, Cape Verdeans, Haitians, and Africans in the archdiocese. O'Malley, facing both a budget shortfall and a priest shortage, has closed eighty parishes and more than a dozen schools.

None of the contributors seems discouraged by the archdiocese's present difficulties. Schmidt argues persuasively for an "attitude of hopeful realism" when facing the future, and the other contributors express similar views (p. 235). These insightful essays will be of great benefit to anyone interested in

Boston Catholicism. Given Boston's importance, this volume will also prove valuable to readers with a more general interest in American Catholic history.

Salve Regina University

JOHN F. QUINN

The Bicentennial History of the Archdiocese of New York, 1808–2008. By Thomas J. Shelley. (Strasbourg: Éditions du Signe. 2007. Pp. 623. \$65.00. ISBN 978-2-746-81945-0.)

Catholics in New York: Society, Culture and Politics 1808–1946. Edited by Terry Golway. (New York: Fordham University Press and the Museum of the City of New York. 2008. Pp. 206. \$34.95. ISBN 978-0-823-22904-8.)

Ostensibly, the showpiece event for the bicentennial of the Archdiocese of New York was the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to New York City in April 2008, when the Holy Father celebrated both the bicentenary of the archdiocese at Yankee Stadium, as well as the third anniversary of his own election as Supreme Pontiff at St. Patrick's Cathedral. But, in long-range terms, perhaps the most significant element of the New York bicentennial celebration was the publication of what the archdiocese has lacked for so long—a comprehensive, scholarly, readable history. The Strasbourg-based Éditions du Signe has been mining American Catholic history for over a decade, producing dozens of diocesan histories of the coffee-table variety, heavy on the visuals, with at least one photograph of every parish in the diocese. But make no mistake: The New York volume is not a typical coffee-table book.

There is good reason why authors have shied away from writing a New York archdiocesan history: There is too much Catholic history in New York. This single diocese includes in its story the first American-born saint, the first American citizen saint, the only canonized American diocesan priest, the first American cardinal, the first Catholic presidential candidate, and the first papal visit to the United States. Its significant figures and institutions include the United Nations, Ellis Island, Catholic universities and colleges, Maryknoll, *America* magazine, Isaac Hecker, Dorothy Day, and Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. Volumes have been written about each of these, but painting all of them into a single canvas has proved too daunting for most authors. Thomas J. Shelley—a priest of the archdiocese, professor of historical theology at Fordham, and formerly professor of church history at the archdiocesan seminary at Dunwoodie, Yonkers—has a long reputation as a respected historian of the local church. Shelley is an excellent writer with a broad knowledge of the historical sources for his subject. In twenty well-developed chapters, Shelley takes the reader from the earliest appearance of French missionaries in New York in the seventeenth century to the triple challenges facing Cardinal Edward Egan's administration in the early days of the twenty-first century: 9/11, the priest sex-abuse crisis, and the parish-realignment initiative. Shelley's handling of the sex-abuse crisis may well become a template for