

7-1-1982

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Recommended Citation

Guignard, Michael. "The Case of Sacred Heart Parish." *Maine History* 22, 1 (1982): 21-36.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol22/iss1/3>

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THE CASE OF SACRED HEART PARISH

The Irish have traditionally been the assimilators within the American Catholic Church. Controlling the American hierarchy during the Know-Nothing and other nativist movements, the Irish quickly realized that the church would have to rid itself of its more blatant foreign traits in order to be accepted in the United States. As a result, clerics like Archbishop John Ireland made so vigorous an effort to Americanize the church that Pope Benedict felt compelled to issue a papal bull condemning such attempts.¹ Americanization proved especially galling to those Catholics, like the French Canadians, who considered their native tongue and customs to be integral parts of their faith. In addition to concerns about attempts to restrict the use of their language in the church, the French Canadians believed that the Irish lacked “their warmth of emotion and devotion to religious matters,”² and they missed the pomp and pageantry of their ethnic church when forced to worship in an Irish parish. They also abhorred the Irish method of controlling parish finances and schools.³

Unlike other New England states, however, Maine had experienced little contention between the Irish and the Francos before the twentieth century. Amicable relations had been maintained between the two groups through the efforts of Bishop James A. Healy, the first black Catholic bishop in the United States. Installed as bishop of Portland in 1875, Healy presided over the diocese until his death twenty-five years later. He not only tempered the assimilationist attitude of the Irish but also mastered the French language and won Franco confidence and cooperation by sympathizing with their sense of injustice and neglect. Healy “lavished a disproportionate amount of



Most Rev. James A. Healy, D.D.
(1830-1900)

his time, energy, funds and attentions” on French parishes until his death in 1900.⁴ French Canadians hoped that he would be succeeded by one of their own. They were sadly disappointed, however. William Henry O’Connell was named to the see, and contention quickly developed.⁵

The first major controversy involved the division of St. Francis de Sales parish, which, at the turn of the century, served all 3,000 Catholics in Waterville, only 265 of whom were Irish. The parish was national and not territorial.⁶ Whereas a territorial parish served all Catholics within an area regardless of nationality, a national one usually ministered to only one nationality. A Catholic, however, could usually go to either.⁷

On July 8, 1905, Bishop O’Connell announced that a new parish, to be called Sacred Heart, would be formed by dividing St. Francis de Sales, and that the division would become effective on October 1. The old parish was to pay six thousand dollars toward the construction of the new church, the purpose of which was to better minister to the needs of the non-French Catholics in Waterville and the surrounding area, whose only English-speaking priests were itinerants.⁸

Since Francos living within the territory of Sacred Heart were to attend the new church, the French would thus outnumber the Irish by 1,200 to 265. To deal with this situation, the parish was to be bilingual. Father John Kealy, the new pastor, spoke fluent French, and Father Renaud, his assistant, was of French-Canadian parentage. Still, that the parish had been formed to serve the non-French population of the city and would have an Irish pastor proved galling to the French but was tolerated by Father Narcisse Charland, the pastor of St. Francis de Sales.⁹

The first two weeks following O'Connell's announcement seem to have passed without incident. The first hint of trouble came on July 26 when the bishop ordered Father Charland to control his people and not bother to appeal the decision to a higher tribunal.¹⁰ He also warned Father Pierre Dupont of Biddeford to "say nothing at all about the matter to parish division."¹¹ In a letter to the bishop, Dupont, a good friend of Charland and a firm opponent of Irish assimilators, had voiced his opposition to the division of St. Francis de Sales.¹² In an effort to avoid further controversy, O'Connell advised Father Kealy to be cautious and prudent and to cultivate Charland's friendship.¹³

Five days later the bishop warned a Waterville nun that he would tolerate no opposition to his decision.¹⁴ On the same day, he rebuked Charland for releasing, without permission, the text of the letter on the division. "Knowing the temper of your own people, by speaking publicly in a nationalistic way and by practically criticizing the action of the Bishop in making a division of the parish," O'Connell wrote, "you were guilty of serious insubordination." He then went on to accuse Charland on inflaming the people, and he told the priest to acknowledge his fault and take responsibility for the action of his people.¹⁵

When Father Kealy subsequently met with Charland on August 1, he was warmly received and was granted permission to say mass in the basement of St. Francis de Sales each Sunday. This pleased O'Connell who quickly wrote to Charland, hinting that perhaps he had been too harsh in his earlier letter.¹⁶

Unfortunately, harmony did not long prevail. Several French-Canadians in Waterville had petitioned Diomedede Falconio, the apostolic delegate at Washington, for a reversal of O'Connell's decision. The prelate responded by telling the dissidents that the decision was fair and that



William Cardinal O'Connell
(1859-1944)

they should trust Charland's interpretation of the bishop's words.¹⁷ While this did little to settle the dispute, it does indicate, when coupled with the cordial reception given Father Kealy in August, that Charland was not instigating the trouble but was caught between an irascible flock and the bishop.

As a minority group in Canada, the Francos had become extremely sensitive to anything appearing to threaten *la survivance* (ethnic and religious survival).¹⁸ Since some Quebecois have considered the early French-Canadian emigrants to the United States as constituting the least desirable element of Quebec's population,¹⁹ it is interesting to note that Waterville received the state's first significant influx of French Canadians.²⁰ Evidence exists to show that a number of French Canadians at Waterville sometimes showed little respect for either the church or its authority.²¹ Thus, when Bishop O'Connell wrote to Father Charland about "the temper of your own people," he was not simply making a snide comment about his opponents. Apparently, Charland himself had told the bishop that his French flock could sometimes react very emotionally and that the faith of some of his parishioners was not strong.²²

French-Canadian newspapers in Maine also opposed the division. They saw it as another Irish attempt to Anglicize Francos. *Le Messager* of Lewiston severely criticized the division in September, and on October 10 it reported that O'Connell wanted the new parish to be exclusively English speaking.²³ A week later, it quoted Father Kealy as having said that the French Canadians in his parish would worship at St. Francis de Sales and that the new parish would be monoligual. By October *La Justice* of Biddeford had entered the fray. It accused Bishop O'Connell of having caused cruel vexations for the French-Canadian population of Waterville by his "arbitrary act," and Editor Fred Bonneau attributed the decision to the incessant Irish quest for domination of the

church. Plaintively, he asked, "What have we done to deserve such punishment?" Bonneau ended his column with a pledge to maintain the French language.²⁴

The reliability of these accounts is questionable. Bishop O'Connell maintained that he had said nothing to imply that Sacred Heart would be solely English speaking.²⁵ In fact, he had ordered Father Kealy to celebrate mass in both languages.²⁶ Moreover, the accuracy of Kealy's pronouncements, as quoted in the French press, is suspect. The bishop had told both pastors that the French within the territory of Sacred Heart parish were to worship there. Otherwise, the new church could not sustain itself with only 265 non-French parishioners.²⁷ Since Kealy carefully obeyed the bishop's instructions, it is indeed unlikely that he would have allowed the French in his new parish to worship at St. Francis de Sales. That two separate papers attributed the same words to him hardly adds to their veracity; French-Canadian newspapers commonly carried each other's stories. Diocesan authorities protested the falsehoods circulated by the French press and ordered Father Dupont of Biddeford to denounce the errors appearing in *La Justice*.²⁸

The situation in Waterville was further complicated by O'Connell's departure on a worldwide tour, at the conclusion of which he was appointed coadjutor bishop of the archdiocese of Boston, with the right to succession. Consequently, Father Edward Hurley administered the Portland diocese from the time of O'Connell's departure until the appointment of the new bishop.

When Father Kealy arrived in Waterville on October 6, 1905, he discovered that local French Canadians believed that they could worship in either parish, but Hurley assured him that this was not the case. When Kealy also complained that Father Charland was exercising parochial jurisdiction within the limits of Sacred Heart parish by

administering the sacraments and by collecting money from the French Canadians,²⁹ Hurley counseled patience until O'Connell returned and could resolve the situation.³⁰ Charland defended himself by saying that he could only advise his people to attend Sacred Heart, not force them. This remained his position throughout the conflict.

In March, 1906, the *Comité pour la Survivance du Maine* was formed in Lewiston to oppose what was viewed as Irish encroachment on *la survivance*. The *Comité* sent a delegation to Rome to ask the Pope to reverse O'Connell's decision and to appoint a French Canadian to the bishopric in Maine.³¹ They presented a letter to papal authorities, which was written by Father Charland, who described his people's distrust of the Irish hierarchy and their opposition to the parish division. The *Comité's* efforts proved fruitless. Not only did the papacy refuse to reverse O'Connell's decision, but, in September, 1906, it also appointed Father Louis S. Walsh, a cleric disliked by the French in Maine, to be bishop of the diocese.³²

Meanwhile, tensions continued between Kealy and Charland. By mid-1906 actual construction had not yet begun on the new Sacred Heart church, and Father Charland refused to continue payments on the six thousand dollar assessment until it did.³³ During the episcopal interregnum, Waterville Francos also ignored O'Connell's decision, claiming that diocesan authorities had revoked it.

In May, 1907, Bishop Walsh, an excellent and decisive administrator, unequivocally reiterated the diocesan position. Arguing that the division had never been annulled, he ordered work on the new church to begin at once. He also stated that he alone would resolve the financial difficulties existing between Kealy and Charland. Stressing that all Catholics within the territorial bounds of the new parish belonged to Sacred Heart, Walsh gave



Most Rev. Louis S. Walsh, D.D.
(1858-1924)

Kealy sole authority to minister to their needs and to collect their offerings.³⁴ Lewiston's *Le Messenger* protested this decision and accused the bishop of planning to make Sacred Heart an English-speaking parish because he stipulated that it would be bilingual for the present only.³⁵

Now Father Charland appealed to the apostolic delegate. He maintained that O'Connell had told him that the French were free to belong to either parish and that this position had been reiterated by Bishop Walsh at a meeting of the diocesan council, held on April 25, 1907. According to Charland, the new bishop had taken this position in order to gain support for the division from the French clerics serving on the council. To support these allegations, the Waterville priest enclosed letters from Fathers Pierre Dupont and Felix Trudel.³⁶

Walsh responded in a letter to the apostolic delegate on August 24. He enclosed a letter from O'Connell, who stated that he had no recollection of having told Charland that the French within the boundaries of Sacred Heart could remain parishioners of St. Francis de Sales, and Walsh denied Charland's version of the council meeting. To buttress his point, he provided affidavits from Fathers T. H. Wallace, M. C. McDonough, and E. F. Hurley.³⁷

Such charges and countercharges undoubtedly exacerbated relations between French and Irish clerics throughout the state. The tone of Walsh's letter to the apostolic delegate reveals his impatience with those who continued to oppose diocesan policies. He declared that the arguments of his opponents were based "upon falsehood or a misrepresentation," and he asked whether Father Charland was his subordinate or whether he was the bishop of Waterville. Walsh concluded by declaring that the Waterville priest did "not think straight, see straight, talk straight, walk straight or act straight."³⁸

The apostolic delegate, Diomedede Falconio, finally resolved the dispute on July 13, 1908, by upholding the division and the requirement that all French Canadians living within the jurisdiction of Sacred Heart must attend the new church, which was to be opened on January 28. Furthermore, the new parish was to be bilingual, not English speaking as Bishop Walsh apparently wished to make it in the future.³⁹

The French press emphasized that Falconio's decision regarding bilingualism was a defeat for Walsh. *La Justice*, however, expressed sympathy for those French Canadians who would be forced to attend the new church against their will. It referred to the 1,000 Francos "condamnés à s'irlandiser" (condemned to becoming Irish) in order to please 265 Irishmen. Quoting from the bishop's letter of August 24 attacking Charland, the paper asserted that everyone knew the French priest to be a great man, and Editor Bonneau promised yet another appeal to Rome.⁴⁰

On March 4, 1908, Walsh wrote to Charland, placing the entire blame for the controversy on him and castigating him for not instructing and encouraging his people to attend Sacred Heart. The bishop ordered the restoration to Kealy of all monies collected from Sacred Heart parishioners since October 1, 1905, and he directed the Waterville pastor to order all French Canadians within the jurisdiction of Sacred Heart to attend that church. Walsh tartly observed that "in the Catholic Church the people are not to think and say and do as they like, but they are to follow and obey the Church Authorities."⁴¹ Charland responded by agreeing to pay the remaining portion of the assessment stipulated by Bishop O'Connell's decision. On June 19, the apostolic delegate brought the dispute to a final conclusion by refusing to allow the French to make another appeal to Rome.⁴²

At first glance, the intense French-Canadian resistance to the division seems a little pointless. After all, Bishop O'Connell had stipulated that the new parish would be bilingual. However, there were other issues involved besides language. French-Canadian parishes were not solely concerned with religious life, but also served as a "collective conscience of the folk."⁴³ The French-Canadian parish in New England was the social center of the community.⁴⁴ The pastor acted not only as the spiritual leader, but provided advice on mundane problems as well. The French Canadians found it impossible to establish such rapport with Irish pastors, even if they spoke French, because Irish priests were thought to be "insensitive, intolerant, and arbitrary."⁴⁵ From this perspective it is more understandable why the French Canadians objected to the division. Their traditional antipathy toward the Irish led them to believe, according to Charland, that Sacred Heart would be, or would soon become, an English-speaking parish, exclusively.

Charland worked hard to mute opposition among members of his flock by persuading diocesan officials to make Sacred Heart bilingual. Much to his chagrin, however, even this did not quiet the discontent. In retrospect it seems that Bishop Walsh's behavior toward Father Charland was too harsh. The evidence suggests that the pastor personally did not oppose the division, provided Sacred Heart was bilingual.⁴⁶ His refusal to force his parishioners into the parish may well have been motivated more by his desire to prevent the faithful from completely abandoning the church than from any personal desire to undermine a diocesan decision. At the turn of the century, it was not uncommon for French Canadians to abandon the church rather than worship in an Irish parish.⁴⁷ Walsh's resolve to uphold and enforce O'Connell's decision only increased the bitterness between the antagonists and solidified opposition to him. As a

consequence, angry strife between the two major ethnic groups comprising Maine's Catholic community characterized the next seven years of his episcopacy.

NOTES

¹Thomas Maynard, *The Story of American Catholicism* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1941), p. 285; Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1951), p. 134.

²George Theriault, "The Franco-Americans in a New England Community: An Experiment in Survival" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1951), p. 346 (hereafter cited as Theriault, "Franco-Americans").

³*Ibid.*, pp. 345-46.

⁴Albert Foley, *Bishop Healy: Beloved Outcaste* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Young, 1954), p. 137; Albert Foley, *God's Men of Color* (New York: Arno Press, 1955), p. 167. See also James A. Healy to Pierre Dupont, April 2, 1892, Chancery Library, Diocese of Portland, Portland, Me. (all correspondence and diaries hereafter cited are in the Chancery Library).

⁵(Biddeford) *La Justice*, Sept. 30, 1900.

⁶James Paul Allen, "Catholics in Maine: A Social Geography," (Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, 1970), p. 151 (hereafter cited as Allen, "Catholics in Maine").

⁷Kenneth Woodbury, "An Incident between the French-Canadians and the Irish in the Diocese of Maine in 1906," *New England Quarterly* 40 (June 1967): 260-61.

⁸Bishop's House to John Kealy, July 8, 1905; Bishop's House to Narcisse Charland, July 8, 1905.

⁹Bishop's House to Pierre Dupont, March 31, 1906. See excerpts from Charland's letters of July 30, 1905, and March 9, 1906, in Philip E. Desjardins, comp., "Case of the Sacred Heart Parish," Document Folio, No. 6, Chancery Library. O'Connell made a special effort to assure Charland's goodwill by appointing Kealy, a priest whom Charland knew and liked. See O'Connell to Charland, July 20, 1905.

¹⁰O'Connell to Charland, July 26, 1905.

¹¹O'Connell to Dupont, July 26, 1905.

¹²Michael Guignard, "Maine's Corporation Sole Controversy," *Maine Historical Society Newsletter* 12 (Winter 1973): 111-26. See also Louis S. Walsh to Dupont, Feb. 15, 1910, and April 24, 1912, as well as Walsh, *Diary*, May 19, July 22, 24, 1910, Feb. 20, Dec. 28, 1912.

¹³O'Connell to Kealy, July 26, 1905. O'Connell repeated essentially the same message to Kealy in letters of Aug. 9, 14, 28, 1905, and April 13, 1906.

¹⁴O'Connell to Sister Superior, Ursaline Convent, Waterville, Me., July 31, 1905.

¹⁵O'Connell to Charland, July 31, 1905.

¹⁶Kealy wrote to O'Connell on August 1, informing him of Charland's cooperation. O'Connell to Kealy, Aug. 3, 1905; O'Connell to Charland, Aug. 4, 1905.

¹⁷Desjardins, comp. "The Case of the Sacred Heart Parish," p. 192.

¹⁸Allen, "Catholics in Maine," p. 144.

¹⁹In 1867 George Etienne Cartier said that those leaving Canada were the rabble of society. He is quoted in Alexandre Bélisle, *Histoire de la Presse Franco-Américaine et des Canadiens-Français aux États-Unis* (Worcester, Mass.: Opinion Publique, 1911), p. 14. See also Rev. J.B. Nycolin to Bishop David W. Bacon, Jan. 11, 1859.

²⁰Albert Fecteau, "The French-Canadian Community in Waterville, Maine" (M.A. thesis, University of Maine at Orono, 1952).

²¹See Philip E. Desjardins, comp., "Father John Bapst: A Sketch from the Woodstock Letters," Chancery Library; J.B. Nycolin to Bacon, Jan. 11, 1859, July 22, 1863.

²²O'Connell to Charland, July 26, 1905.

²³(Lewiston) *Le Messenger*, Sept. 29, Oct. 10, 17, 1905. All quotations from French-language newspapers were translated by the author.

²⁴(Biddeford) *La Justice*, Oct. 5, 12, 1905.

²⁵Father Philip E. Desjardins compiled several volumes containing a chronological account of the important events in the history of the diocese of Portland. The information cited here is from the fourth volume of the chronological series.

²⁶O'Connell to Kealy, Sept. 12, 1905.

²⁷Walsh to Falconio, Aug. 24, 1907.

²⁸See Edward Ham, "Journalism and the French Survival in New England," *New England Quarterly* 11 (March 1938): 88-107. It was not

uncommon for *La Justice* and *Le Messenger* to print the same articles during the controversy, but *Le Messenger*, a daily, gave a more thorough account of the conflict. See also Bishop's House to Dupont, March 31, 1906.

²⁹Desjardins, comp., "Case of the Sacred Heart Parish," pp. 192, 194.

³⁰Hurley to Kealy, Jan. 19, April 21, 1906.

³¹Allen, "Catholics in Maine," p. 201.

³²(Biddeford) *La Justice*, Oct. 10, 1912.

³³Charland to Hurley, Aug. 29, 1906, cited in Desjardins, comp., "Case of the Sacred Heart Parish," p. 194.

³⁴Walsh, Diary, May 19, 1907.

³⁵(Lewiston) *Le Messenger*, May 21, 1907.

³⁶Charland's letter of June 17, 1907, has not been located. Since Bishop Walsh makes frequent reference to it in his letter of August 24, 1907, to the apostolic delegate, one can obtain a clear indication of its contents. See Desjardins, comp., "Case of the the Sacred Heart Parish," pp. 202-4.

³⁷Walsh to Falconio, Aug. 24, 1907.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹See Walsh, Diary, Jan. 15, 1908.

⁴⁰(Biddeford) *La Justice*, Feb. 6, April 2, July 30, 1908.

⁴¹Walsh to Charland, March 4, 1908, cited in Desjardins, comp., "Case of the Sacred Heart Parish," pp. 210-11.

⁴²Walsh, Diary, March 19, 27, 1908.

⁴³Therault, "Franco-Americans," p. 254.

⁴⁴Alexandre Goulet, *Une Nouvelle France en Nouvelle Angleterre* (Paris: Henri Jouve, 1934), p. 94.

⁴⁵Therault, "Franco-Americans," p. 346. See also (Biddeford) *La Justice*, July 28, 1910.

⁴⁶See excerpts of Charland's letters of July 30, 1905, and March 9, 1906, cited in Desjardins, comp., "Case of the Sacred Heart Parish," p. 200. Bishop O'Connell recognized Charland's good faith. See O'Connell to Charland, July 5, Aug. 4, 1905.

⁴⁷See Robert Rumilly, *Histoire des Franco-Américains* (Montreal: L'Union St. Jean-Baptiste d'Amérique, 1958). The editor of *La Justice*, on Oct. 19, 1905, maintained that if Bishop O'Connell forbade the use of French in Maine churches, the French-Canadians would leave the church. French dissidents in Lewiston also threatened to boycott the church if their parish were named Holy Cross instead of Ste. Croix (see

[Biddeford] *La Justice*, Feb. 22, 1924). The same point is made by Charlotte Michaud in an undated series of newspaper articles on SS. Peter and Paul Church, Lewiston, Me., available in the library of the Maine Historical Society, Portland, Me.

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