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A Look at Paterson's "Grand Old Man"

Very Reverend William McNulty, pastor of St. John's, Paterson (1863-1922), dean of Bergen and Passaic counties.

Paterson came to a halt on June 22, 1922. Businesses throughout the city closed for the day, and thousands thronged the streets around St. John's Church and along the route to Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Totowa—all to say farewell to an Irish immigrant who had not merely made good but done good in the city, Father William McNulty, better known as Dean McNulty. In his death the city lost a beloved institution; now it was taking time to express that love.

William McNulty was born in Ballyshannon, County Donegal, Ireland, in 1829 and early in his life felt called to the priesthood. In 1850 he migrated to the United States and entered St. John's College (now Fordham University), from which he graduated with honors in 1853. James Roosevelt Bayley, then secretary to Archbishop John Hughes of New York, instructed the young aspirant to the priesthood to enter Mount St. Mary's Seminary at Emmitsburg, Maryland and indicated he would probably be assigned to New Jersey. A few weeks after this letter, Newark was established as the see city of a new diocese embracing all of New Jersey and Bayley became its first bishop. On August 6, 1857, he ordained McNulty to the priesthood in St. Patrick's Cathedral in Newark.

The new priest was assigned to assist Father Bernard McQuaid with the new Seton Hall College in Madison, and for the next three years he served as professor, prefect of discipline and vice president of the fledgling institution. When Bayley moved the college to South Orange in 1860, McNulty remained in Madison to serve as chaplain to the Sisters of Charity as they moved into their new motherhouse. He also ministered to the pastoral needs of Catholics at Basking Ridge and Mendham. The young priest was doing good work in Morris County and was not very happy when, in October 1863, Bayley appointed him pastor of St. John's Church, Paterson. McNulty could have had no idea he would hold the job for the next 59 years.

Paterson's principal industry in 1863 was manufacturing locomotives. The small silk industry, however, was on the verge of explosive expansion and with this growth would come also a vast increase in population, from 19,000 in 1860 to 101,000 by 1900. Much of the increase came from immigration, and many of the immigrants were Catholic. Young Father McNulty played a leading role in meeting their needs and in directing the growth of the Church in Paterson.

On arrival, McNulty found that the existing St. John's Church, already expanded once from its original size, could no longer accommodate the congregation, and that its site would not allow further expansion. In 1865 he bought land from the Society for Useful Manufactures on the corner of Grand and Main Streets, raising the $10,000 price in two months. He engaged Patrick Charles Keely, the prominent New York architect, to design the new structure, whose stone was quarried in Little Falls and floated down the Morris Canal to be dressed on the building site.

By July 31, 1870, construction had progressed enough for the building to be dedicated by Bishop William F. Wood of Philadelphia, substituting for Bishop Bayley, who was in Europe. The new St. John’s Church was 88 feet wide and 180 feet deep. Although in use henceforth as continued on page 2
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the parish church, it was by no means complete. Over the next several years a new altar was installed, the front minarets and the side tower raised to their full height, and the interior decoration completed.

On June 29, 1890, the entire $232,000 cost having been paid off, St. John's Parish happily participated in the consecration of the church. One of McNulty's proteges later often told the story that the pastor had designed the church so that, when Paterson became the see city of a new diocese, space would be available for the bishop's cathedra.

Fifteen years after McNulty's death his expectation was fulfilled by the establishment of the diocese of Paterson, with St. John's as its cathedral church.

Construction of the new St. John's by no means occupied all of McNulty's time or attention. He regularly attended to the scattered Catholics in western Bergen County, and in 1864, within a year of his assignment to Paterson, laid the cornerstone of St. Luke's Church, Ho-ho-kus. In Paterson itself, German Catholics had already built St. Boniface Church three years before his arrival. But the rapid spread of the city outward from the industrial center along the Passaic River below the Great Falls, and the burgeoning growth of the Catholic population required new facilities.

In 1867 McNulty bought a large parcel of land at Broadway and 18th Streets and converted the existing structures into a chapel and St. Agnes Institute, a school staffed by the Sisters of Charity. Priest from St. John's served the area until 1875, when Bishop Corrigan established the new facility as St. Joseph's parish.

In 1872 McNulty purchased the Fonda Estate on Main Street as the new site of the hospital, where a three-story frame house was quickly renovated for the purpose. Two years later a new two-story building was erected to accommodate the ever-growing patient load, which that year was 227. Civic and industrial leaders, as well as the wider Catholic community, contributed to the development and growth of St. Joseph's and helped maintain its high level of service.

At the turn of the century, McNulty addressed two additional concerns. As opportunity allowed or need required, many young women in Paterson were now employed, whether in the mills or increasingly in offices and schools. To provide safe residence for them, McNulty, again with the Sisters of Charity, opened St. Frances Home for Working Girls in 1897. Three years later another building was obtained. By 1920 the entire complex could accommodate 100 working women.

During the same period McNulty sought to provide care for the elderly, who in growing numbers found themselves...
McNulty's long list of accomplishments also includes the establishment of a boy's home, the fostering of social, athletic and literary groups for his parishioners and active participation in diocesan affairs. In 1886, to facilitate administration of the diocese, Bishop Wigger established "rural deans" for the outlying counties and appointed McNulty dean of Bergen and Passaic counties. Hence the title by which he became known in every corner of the area—Dean McNulty.

No wonder the city stopped for his funeral. During 59 years as pastor of St. John's he promoted many initiatives for the religious, educational, social and health needs of the community. But the civic memory is perhaps best expressed in Gaetano Federici's statue of McNulty seated, with his arm around a young boy confidently speaking his needs and dreams to the dean.

Just published this spring is Spanish Roots of America, a study of the influence of hispanics in the territory of what is now the United States. In an era when Americans are trying to come to grips with the implications of a multi-cultural society, this book is most timely, because it provides insight into the development of one of the persistent, yet frequently overlooked, threads in the pattern of American development.

Bishop David Arias, who formerly taught Church history, divides his work into two parts: the first examines in seven brief chapters the scope of the hispanic presence from the early 16th century to the present; the second is a chronology of hispanic activity, detailing year-by-year the interaction of the Spanish with the land, the native inhabitants, and other European groups equally intent upon expansion.

The work provides a tremendous amount of information, and a context for understanding the hispanic role in the United States. It is available in both cloth and paper binding from Our Sunday Visitor Press, 200 Noll Plaza, Huntington, Indiana 46750.
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