

St. Patrick's Day Mass – March 17, 2012
St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York
Edwin Cardinal O'Brien

A happy St. Maewyn's Day to you all.

Of course we all know that Maewyn Succat, born around 387 A.D. had his name Romanized early in life and it became Patricius Magnus Succatus. So a happy St. Patrick's Day to all!

I am pleased and privileged to offer the homily on this great feast day, and for several reasons:

First, as I look out upon this large and distinguished congregation, I am struck in awe by the presence of the members of the 69th, Infantry Regiment, the fighting 69th as they have been known for decades and more. Their origin is in the mid 1850s as the 69th New York State Militia. At the start of the Civil War, they became the 69th Infantry of New York City as part of the Irish Brigade that drew troops, mostly Irish from up and down the Eastern seaboard. Their heroism at Antietam and Gettysburg was a principal cause of the Union victory in the Civil War. The many members of the Fighting 69th in our midst and their comrades have kept very much alive the noble traditions of the Irish Brigade in multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan the last decade. We New Yorkers and our grateful Nation salute you, courageous men and women, we pray for your fallen heroes and for God's protection of each of you in the months ahead.

Another reason I am pleased to be here today is somewhat more personal. As you know, it was four weeks ago today that 22 men of the Church were created cardinals and I was privileged to be one of them. What you might not know is that there was another American created a cardinal that day: sure, he resisted until the end, he made every attempt to keep it secret, and refused all the overtures by the press for photos and interviews. So it is my distinct honor to announce to you, that that other American Cardinal admitted into that unique College of Cardinals was none other than Shirley's son, your own Archbishop, Timothy Cardinal Dolan!

I am so grateful to Cardinal Dolan who almost a year ago extended the invitation to me to preach this Mass. On this sanctuary floor almost 47 years ago I prostrated myself here along with 30 others of my Dunwoodie class to receive the sacred order of Priesthood at the hands of Francis Cardinal Spellman. And again, almost 16 years ago to be consecrated a bishop by the most remembered and courageous

John Cardinal O'Connor. And I was honored, for ten years, to have served as a member of the staff of this famed Cathedral parish.

It was Archbishop John Hughes, Irish born, who to the consternation of many laid the cornerstone for this Cathedral on August 15, 1859. The City and the Nation were at that time in a deep financial depression: bank closures and unemployment were rampant. And the site he chose to build was well north of the then bustling heart of New York. His whole plan was called Hughes' Folly, so unrealistic were the finances as well as in the timing and the choice of this very location.

Nevertheless, the dauntless Archbishop, with prophetic vision and typically Irish determination—what others might call stubbornness, insisted on the need, to erect quote “a Cathedral in the City of New York that may be worthy of our increasing numbers, intelligence and wealth as a religious community, and as a public architectural monument to the present and prospective greatness of this metropolis of the American continent.” This block on 5th Avenue between 50th and 51st St. – Hughes' Folly?

With the interlude of the Civil War, it was not until 1879, twenty years later, that America's first Cardinal, John Cardinal McCloskey, finally dedicated this, America's Cathedral. And what a symbolic triumph it was for all Catholics of New York, largely immigrants, highly suspect and openly rejected by the New York elite of the day. For the Irish of New York it was especially meaningful. Transplanted from a small spot in the north Atlantic where they were forced to smuggle bread and wine and priests into hidden forests for hushed celebrations of the Eucharist on “Mass rocks”, they now had complete freedom to build their churches openly. They were now proud Americans and loyal Catholics. In complete obedience to Church teaching, they brought children into this world many of whom would become priests, nuns and brothers saturating our country's urban centers and building the vast empire of Catholic educational and charitable institutions.

Author Edward Wakin has written:

“There are very few churches from Maine to California, from Canada to Mexico, which Irish hands have not helped to build, whose (Irish) purses have not supported, and in which (Irish) hearts are not found worshipping.”

And none the more so than in this Cathedral, this marvelous monument to our Faith. Within these walls the tears of the Nation have been shed, through all the

wars and the innumerable crises and tragedies of the last century and a quarter; surely, and most poignantly, in the laying to rest of many dozens of 9/11 heroes whose loved ones chose this Cathedral to give them final honor.

And what Cathedral, outside Italy perhaps, has hosted three recent Popes! -- Paul VI in 1965, John Paul II in 1979 and again in 1995, and Benedict XVI in 2008. Many of us can remember that April day when Pope Benedict, from that Cathedra, called for a new Pentecost for the Church in America. He said he was “particularly happy” to be in this Cathedral. “Perhaps, more than any other church in the United States, this place is known and loved as a house of prayer for all people. The spires of St. Patrick’s Cathedral are dwarfed by the skyscrapers of the Manhattan skyline, yet in the heart of this busy metropolis they are a vivid reminder of the constant yearning of the human spirit to rise to God.”

Great words from a great Pontiff. But what of the future of this edifice to the glory of God and the memory of Patrick?

If these majestic spires are to remain strong and lofty, if this Cathedral’s once-sure foundation is to continue to bear the burdened prayers of millions who kneel here annually in humble petition, sacrifice no less than that of the poverty-stricken Catholics of the 1850s and 60s will be called for – and with some urgency. Help us restore St. Patrick’s Cathedral.

We will be challenged to make those sacrifices in thanksgiving for the freedom of religion which this holy temple proclaims day in and day out – a freedom of religion in startling peril at recent first signs of not so subtle government strangulation.

We will all be challenged to sacrifice for this Cathedral’s ongoing strength. And should we not feel compelled to do so in honor of those visionary forbears of Faith whose total trust both in God’s Providence and in the good will of our neighbors, Catholic and non-Catholic alike? To honor those who dared to embark on this daring venture to raise to the heavens a Cathedral of suitable magnificence? In the ensuing years since, decade after decade until now, how many have sacrificed, and far beyond their means, to help shore up these sacred walls! Help us restore St. Patrick’s Cathedral.

And will there be those thousands of hearts to respond with sacrificial generosity to the plea of this newly-minted Cardinal of yours, the present occupant of this cathedra? Friends all, times are changing, and rapidly. Unborn human life,

marriage and family life are under threat, not only from the usual elites—media, academia, but now even from our own elected Governments. How providential it is that we have a President of our National Hierarchy as well as Archbishop of New York who is so effective in proclaiming and defending the faith and values for which this Cathedral has stood for these many years?

And might we take this singular moment to demonstrate our support for him.

Cardinal Dolan, we will help you restore St. Patrick's Cathedral!

As we seek to renew our faith in restoring this beloved cathedral, let us not neglect to turn to Mary. How many prayers has she answered as devotees plead before the graceful statue of Our Lady of New York, in the Lady Chapel behind our main altar. She, indeed, was that first Cathedral, the prototype of all others, who hosted the same Son of God beneath her heart – that same Son of God who, sacramentally, radiates his grace daily throughout the heart of this City from the altar of this Cathedral of St. Patrick.

It was many centuries ago that the Saint we honor today, Patrick, once a slave in Ireland, heard unmistakably, the invitation to return there. The words he heard and obeyed, “We ask thee, young boy, come and walk among us once more.” Indeed may Patrick walk among us and all those who will participate in the parade today. Walk among us, Dear Patrick in the months that lie ahead, and may your patronage and intercession help guarantee the success we pray for in restoring this Cathedral to the majestic grandeur deserving of this grand city and the God we adore here.

Make us worthy of this cathedral, Patrick, help us restore this Cathedral!