



In the Holiness of Truth - November 09, 2006

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A Seventh Saint

On Friday, October 7th, Very Reverend John Duffy, C.S.P., provincial of the Society of St. Paul (The Paulist Fathers), and Reverend Paul Robichaud, C.S.P., a Paulist priest whom I have had the privilege of knowing from his years as rector of the "American Parish" in Rome, came to see me. They wanted to seek my support for a decision of the Paulist Fathers to request that the Holy See declare their founder, Reverend Isaac Thomas Hecker, C.S.P., a saint.

I told Father Duffy and Father Robichaud that, when I received their letter asking for an appointment and mentioning the reason for it, I was a bit taken aback. For some reason, I explained, I had always thought that Father Hecker's "cause" had been introduced in Rome many years ago. Whatever of this, I assured my visitors that they could count on me for enthusiastic cooperation in the process of both beatification and canonization.

"It would be a great gift for the Church Universal but also, and especially, for the Archdiocese of New York to have Father Hecker raised to the altars," I told them. "We have six other New Yorkers whose cases are being considered by the Congregation for Saints in Rome,* and Father Hecker would make a splendid seventh. He was a New Yorker through and through; and because of the truly daunting challenges he faced in his life, he will be an inspiration for us all."

There are several biographies of Father Hecker available in libraries and bookstores, and all are extraordinarily interesting. For the tale they have to tell us is nothing less than an adventure in faith.

Isaac Thomas Hecker was born on December 18, 1819, on Hester Street in the lower East Side of Manhattan. Though his mother was a devout Methodist, he did not seem to identify himself with any particular religious communion. As a young man, he worked for a while in the very successful flour company that was owned by his family and run by his two brothers, but showed little interest in the world of commerce. He rather spent as much of his time as possible studying philosophy and languages and, above all, struggling to discover the meaning of various mystical experiences he had had beginning in 1842, experiences that he felt were drawing him to the Lord along a marvelous but difficult route.

Early in the 1840s, Isaac became involved in politics with a view to addressing the unfair treatment in New York City of the poor and especially of immigrants. Soon, however, he lost his taste for matters political as he witnessed the triumph of the forces of power and corruption in election after election. At this time, in the providence of God, he made the acquaintance of Orestes Brownson, the brilliant philosopher from Boston who became a kind of mentor to the young New Yorker as he strived, with a good deal of internal suffering, to find his way in life, particularly in the life of the spirit.

In 1844, Isaac decided to become a minister of the Gospel. Accordingly, he met with the rector of the Episcopal Church of the Annunciation on Thompson Street in lower Manhattan, asking to be admitted into an Episcopal seminary. However, shortly thereafter he learned that Orestes

Brownson had been received into the Catholic Church and thus approached Bishop (later Archbishop) John Hughes of the Catholic Diocese of New York about becoming a Catholic priest. Bishop Hughes encouraged him; and his Coadjutor Bishop (later Cardinal) John McCloskey, instructed Isaac in the faith and on August 2, 1844, baptized him in St. Patrick's Old Cathedral on Mott Street.

The following year, 1845, after spending many hours in often difficult prayer in the Redemptorist Church of the Holy Redeemer on Third Street, Isaac decided to seek ordination as a Redemptorist priest. Hence, with the blessing of Archbishop Hughes, he crossed the Atlantic to study in Redemptorist seminaries in the Netherlands and later in London, where on October 23, 1849, he was ordained a priest of the Congregation of the Redeemer by Bishop Nicholas Wiseman, who was to become the celebrated Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster who championed the movement to restore the Catholic hierarchy in England.

The Isaac Hecker who returned to New York in 1851 to receive an assignment as a Redemptorist priest in the newly established American Province of the congregation was not at all the Isaac Hecker of his youth. He was now a mature, self-confident priest who, after two years of proclaiming the Gospel in Liverpool, England, had developed into both a powerful preacher of parish missions for Catholics and a compelling lecturer on the subject of the Church of Rome for non-Catholics.

Shortly after his return to New York, Father Hecker joined forces with three young Redemptorist priests to give parish missions in New York, the first of which was scheduled for St. Joseph's parish in Greenwich Village. The team, all of whom were converts to the faith, was wonderfully successful. Indeed, it is reported that at one of its missions in St. Patrick's Old Cathedral over 7,000 attended, went to confession and received the Eucharist.

In addition to all of this, Father Hecker began to seize more opportunities to speak to non-Catholic groups and even wrote books especially for them in which he presented the Catholic faith as the one certain answer to the deepest yearnings of the human heart. Remarkably, in an era of intense anti-Catholicism, he was everywhere received with warmth and admiration.

In the mid-1850s, clouds began to gather in the life of Father Hecker. He and his priest associates felt the need for a specifically American, as opposed to Irish or German, house to serve as a center for English-speaking preachers of parish missions. His Provincial Superior, Very Reverend George Ruland, C.Ss.R., was adamantly opposed and rejected Father Hecker's request to appeal to the Superior General in Rome, Very Reverend Nicholas Mauron, C.Ss.R. Nonetheless, because the Rule of the Redemptorists sanctioned such an appeal, Father Hecker, with the support of many American bishops, traveled to the Eternal City to petition a review of the Provincial Superior's decision. The outcome was shattering. After presenting the case to his board of consultors, Father Mauron issued a statement that concluded with the words: "We dismiss you from the bosom of the Congregation."

The immense pain that Father Hecker experienced throughout the entire episode in New York and in Rome is poignantly reflected in the letters he wrote to family and friends at the time. He was a man of the Church, a loyal Religious and a totally dedicated follower of the Lord. His suffering was intense.

The entire matter, however, was brought to an altogether unexpected and altogether happy conclusion thanks to the understanding of Cardinal Alessandro Barberi, Prefect of the

Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, and the extraordinary wisdom and insight of the Holy Father, Blessed Pius IX, who recognized the need for a specifically American congregation of priests in the United States and, in the course of two private audiences, authorized Father Hecker to establish one in New York.

Thus it was that in 1858, Reverend Isaac Thomas Hecker returned to New York and, with the blessing and support of Archbishop Hughes, brought into being the "Missionary Priests of St. Paul the Apostle." The parish assigned to the new congregation and the location of its headquarters was the Parish of St. Paul the Apostle on 59th Street and Columbus Avenue, where Father Hecker had an imposing parish church constructed. Inside is to be found his tomb, on the right as one enters the body of the church.

In 2008, when the Paulist Fathers celebrate the 150th anniversary of their establishment, we will have an opportunity to learn more about their extraordinary founder and, most importantly, about the magnificent work they do for the Lord and his Church in New York and across the world. We dare to hope that at that time there might be some encouraging news from Rome about the progress of the case of Reverend Isaac Thomas Hecker, C.S.P., encouraging news about yet another saintly New Yorker.

*The six other New Yorkers who are being considered for sainthood by the Congregation for Saints are Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, Pierre Toussaint, Rose Hawthorne, Father Felix Varela, Dorothy Day and Cardinal Terence Cooke.

Edward Cardinal Egan

Archbishop of New York