

## PROFILE

### JOHN CONNOLLY, BISHOP OF NEW YORK, 1814 – 1825 [\[1\]](#)

In 1815 the records of the Diocese of Liege in Belgium described the recently-consecrated Bishop of New York, John Connolly of the Order of Preachers as "A man who conducts himself like an angel in all things. . . ." [\[2\]](#) The new Irish bishop was fluent in several languages, and had spent thirty-seven years working at high levels for his Order in Rome and the Vatican. He was sixty-four years old, and on his way to the New World as first resident bishop of New York, a diocese which had only four priests to serve it and comprised the whole state of New York and northern New Jersey.

On the international scene, the War of 1812 had ended in February of 1815, and an "era of good feeling" was about to begin. It was an auspicious time for a long-awaited leader to arrive in New York. Connolly had shown strength of spirit and courage in Rome seventeen years earlier when he resisted the French takeover of Dominican properties. But the likelihood that the newly-named bishop would ever return to Europe was slim. He was now a bishop in his declining years, in a distant place with a different culture, and pastor to a different people.

John Connolly was born in the parish of Monknewtown in County Meath, Ireland, in October 1751. [\[3\]](#) His parents had a tenant farm on the hill of Slane where St. Patrick is reputed to have lighted the paschal fire in honor of Ireland's conversion to Christianity. He studied at home and in Drogheda, north of Dublin.

In his youth Connolly entered the Dominican Order and pursued his ecclesiastical studies at the Irish Dominican College of Holy Cross, Louvain. He was a member of the Convent of the Holy Cross when he was ordained on September 24, 1774, in the Cathedral of Saint Romuold in Malines (Mechlin), Belgium, by Cardinal John Henry von Frankenberg. He remained in the country to complete his classical studies until 1777. Then he was called, not to his native Ireland where small numbers of courageous friars were ministering, but to Rome.

When a teaching vacancy occurred at San Sisto and San Clemente in Rome, Connolly was appointed to fill it. He assumed the position of professor and master of students. The Irish Dominican community that he joined in this last quarter of the eighteenth century "generally numbered about fifteen priests, three or four students, and a few brothers. It was fairly well off, and with men such as Luke Concanen and John Connolly on the staff, was reasonably scholarly." [\[4\]](#) Here Connolly spent thirty-seven years in a variety of teaching, administrative and diplomatic capacities, challenged the troops of Napoleon Bonaparte and saved from destruction a major Dominican foundation. Here he was consecrated bishop.

Another Dominican who had received the habit at the Irish Dominican College at Louvain, was Richard Luke Concanen, whom the younger John Connolly eventually followed even to the

bishopric of New York. To take Concanen's place as master of students and philosophy professor Connolly was assigned to Rome from Louvain. Subsequently, as Concanen moved out of a post it was entrusted to Connolly. In 1778 Concanen resigned as subprior because of other demanding responsibilities, and Connolly was appointed in his stead. In 1782 Concanen, now prior, withdrew as Regent of Studies, and Connolly assumed the post. In 1787 Concanen became assistant to the Master General at the Minerva and theologian of the Dominican Casanate library, while Connolly succeeded him as prior of San Sisto and San Clemente.

Before becoming prior, Connolly had received the highest honor the order could bestow, namely, the title of Master of Theology. The friars of the Irish Province, assembled in Dublin wrote, "For the mastership . . . we ask, in virtue of his teaching, the appointment of Father John Connolly, who has passed his examination . and is Regent of our College of San Sisto and San Clemente, Rome. His merits and character are well known to your Most Rev. Paternity."<sup>[5]</sup> This honor was granted without objection as proof of the worth and esteem in which he was held by the head of the Order who knew him well.

Connolly was prior of San Sisto and San Clemente until 1796 when he became procurator of that community, an office he held for ten years. During this time, Connolly also assisted Concanen, who bore the burden of heavy work and correspondence as assistant to the Master of the Order and who had to deal with the Irish bishops. Such activities required a high degree of intelligence, sensitivity, diplomacy, and linguistic ability. Both Connolly and Concanen were therefore well known and respected at the offices of Propaganda Fide and the Roman curia. But the calm spirit and diplomatic talents of John Connolly were about to be severely tested.

Napoleon's troops occupied Rome on the evening of Feb. 9, 1798. Connolly described the situation in a letter to Patrick Plunkett, the Bishop of Meath:

... By an edict of the 16th, General Bertier declares the pope's temporal authority abolished, and the Roman Republic [sic] to be under the protection of that of France. By edicts of this morning the French emigrants are ordered away in the space of 24 hours, and the property of the church is to be sold in the space of two months, to extinguish the debts of the State...<sup>[6]</sup>

In March Connolly reported that the French had seized and sold everything belonging to the English and Scotch colleges in Rome. Four thousand ecclesiastics had been ordered away, four cardinals were confined in the Dominican convent at Civita Vecchia, and the Pope was forced to stay in Siena. Despite all the movement, Connolly took up residence at San Clemente where he had leave to say Mass only on festival days.

Traumatic experiences continued well after the departure of the French army on October 2, 1799. In January 1800, Connolly described his actions regarding San Clemente, an important site of antiquity and property of the Irish Dominicans:

By having obtained leave from the Republic to open that church after its suppression, and serve the public in it as chaplain and confessor, without any emolument, I have saved it from destruction, as also the convent and library . . . It was to render this service to my order that I determined to stay here, if permitted by the Republic. This city is in a

deplorable state, owing to a great scarcity of provisions, particularly bread, and the number of robberies committed almost every night in the streets, houses, and even churches.[\[7\]](#)

Confusion continued under the new Roman Republic, with financial negotiations and settlements of church properties left in poor condition. Connolly became vicar and bursar at San Clemente in 1800 and tried to cope with paying the bills. In 1809 the Papal States were incorporated into the French Empire and Pius VII was arrested and placed under custody in Savona. Restoration of religious life in Rome and repossession of properties began only after Napoleon's fall and the pope returned to the city. These difficult years of testing foreshadowed Connolly's days to come.

John Carroll, Archbishop of Baltimore, petitioned the Propaganda for the erection of four new American dioceses. In April, 1808, Pius VII divided the huge see of Baltimore into the dioceses of Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Bardstown. Carroll had suggestions for all these sees except New York. In 1807, he wrote to the congregation of Propaganda Fide, "It seems necessary that in the beginning the bishop of Boston should exercise jurisdiction over the territory [of New York] . . . . For none of the priests residing in that territory appear to me suited for the episcopacy. I therefore refrain from recommending anyone for that responsible post."[\[8\]](#)

The Cardinals acted quickly in 1808 and unanimously chose Luke Concanen, who was an agent and friend of John Carroll, as well as the personal choice of the pope. When Pius VII approved the selection of Concanen for New York, he added that should the bishop-elect be unable to sail for America because of poor health, John Connolly should be his replacement. Concanen spent over two years attempting to gain passage to America during the period of embargoes on Italian ports. He spent much time at Leghorn, exhausting his finances. Sadly, he died there on June 18, 1810.

With Bonaparte's abdication Pius VII returned to Rome in January, 1814. Restoration of civil and religious order began. The Propaganda took up its concern for filling the see of New York and in its general meeting of September 19, 1814, unanimously voted for John Connolly. He was consecrated bishop on Sunday, November 6, 1814, but maintained responsibility for the repossession and repairs of San Clemente until time for his departure from Rome.



**John Connolly, second bishop of New York**

At last Concanen's replacement, John Connolly, was on his way to the New World. From Rome, the new bishop traveled to Belgium, England and Ireland and obtained two young priests willing to serve in New York. They were Irish-born Michael O'Gorman and James McKenna. Connolly sailed on the *Sally* with its fifty-seven passengers in mid-September of 1815. The transatlantic journey was a long and dangerous one of sixty-seven days, so unduly prolonged that he was believed lost at sea. He arrived ill, without fanfare, in New York on November 24, only to be confined for several weeks until his health returned.

In Baltimore John Carroll eagerly awaited Connolly's arrival. He wrote in mid-1815 to John Troy, Archbishop of Dublin, "We cannot account for Bishop Connolly's not being yet arrived; his Diocese is suffering for him; and for its sake, it is to be wished, that he may come, accompanied by a number of zealous, capable and edifying clergymen."[\[9\]](#) Carroll, who favored American-born and educated clergy, was not at all happy with Rome's choice of bishop for New York, a choice made without consulting him. He expressed his feelings to Charles Plowden, his Jesuit friend in England:

By letters from Abp Troy it is given me to understand, that a Rev. Mr. John Connolly, Dominican, resident at Rome for 37 years, was nominated in Sepr. And consecrated in Novr., as Bishop of N. York; that he was in Flanders about March 20th. On his way to Ireland, where he was to embark for his Bishoprick [sic]. It was known here that before the death of Dr. Concanen his Holiness at the Drs. Intreary [sic], intended to assign to him, as his Coadjutor, the Rev. Mr. Maréchal, a priest of St. Sulpice, now in the seminary here, & worthy of any promotion in the Church. We still expected that this measure would be pursued; and therefore made no presentation or recommendation of any other for that vacant See; however, Mr. Connolly is appointed, with whom none of us are acquainted; nor has anyone in this country been consulted. I wish this may not become a very dangerous precedent, fruitful of mischief by drawing censure upon our religion, & false opinion of the servility of our principles.[\[10\]](#)

Carroll died before Connolly could learn from him his duties in New York. But the new bishop quickly learned from his environment and his fellow priests about the people, the city, and the Catholic Church in New York.

Under James Madison, the nation's fourth president, the United States was at peace. The Treaty of Ghent, 1814, brought a sense of greater unity and national pride to the new nation. Outside the country, there was little knowledge of the United States, and not a great deal of interest in it.

Social life in the United States seemed to some as agreeable as on the continent. The census of 1810 had reported over seven million inhabitants, of whom more than a million were slaves. A sense of independence prevailed and the spirit of Americanism was obvious. Illiteracy was common, duels occurred occasionally and drunkenness and gambling were common vices. But the absence of an official religion in the United States must have puzzled Connolly the most.

New York, the country's most important port, carried the label of a "forest of masts." It equaled European cities for its cosmopolitan flavor. It incorporated the lower end of Manhattan, or "hilly island," and Broadway that had long been a thoroughfare for the Indians. Workmen busied themselves in many areas of the city during their ordinary twelve to fifteen-hour working day. The traffic of carts, carriages and hackneys for hire clogged the streets, impeding the flow of traffic. The city had been the political center of the nation and the state in the 1790s. Yet foxes inhabited churchyards, and scavenger pigs roamed the streets. The lack of a good water supply and clean streets brought periodic bouts of cholera, yellow fever and other diseases. Almost every block boasted of one tavern. The population of the city in 1816 was 93,634: about 85,000 Caucasian, 8,000 free black, and 600 reported as slaves.[\[11\]](#)

For his part, John Connolly faced formidable challenges in a shortage of personnel and funds. Three Jesuits, Maximilliam Rantzau, Benedict Fenwick and Peter Malou, and one Dominican, Thomas Carbry, served the Catholics of New York — a small number indeed for their population. The parishioners could afford but little for the collection box in their parishes. In his adopted city, the bishop found a Catholic minority population of between 13,000 and 15,000. They were mostly poor and largely Irish immigrants escaping political and economic conditions in their homeland. Catholic English, French and Germans composed the smaller numbers. Most of the Catholic laity respected church authorities and a few prosperous laymen played key roles in the American church, exercising church property rights which later became a source of trustee problems.

Three churches existed in the diocese in 1815. The first was St. Peter's, located on Barclay Street and dedicated on November 4, 1796. The second was founded and incorporated by laity who had gathered secretly during the Revolutionary War in private homes, and often in a carpenter's shop on the same street. St. Patrick's church, under construction since 1809, became the new cathedral, and was dedicated in May of 1815. It was located about two miles northeast of Mott Street. St. Mary's, far to the north in Albany, was established in 1813.

#### **St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York, dedicated May 4, 1850**



It was in St. Patrick's Cathedral that Jean Cheverus, Bishop of Boston, installed Connolly as the second Bishop of New York. James Roosevelt Bayley described Connolly as a "small-sized man, very neat in appearance. . . . He was very simple in his manners, and most zealous—singing High Mass every Sunday without mitre or crosier." The writer continued, "many still living remember the humility and the earnest zeal with which he discharged the laborious duties of the confessional, and traversed the city on foot to attend upon the poor and sick."[\[12\]](#) He was more the humble scholar than a dazzling orator.[\[13\]](#) His pupils remembered him as a man of more than ordinary mildness and gentleness of character. His zeal and experience had prepared him for the bishopric in Europe, but not for the problems

he met in this new diocese where

. . . everything was to be created; and whilst his resources were very small, the obstacles in his way were great. The trustee system had not been behind [him] in its early promise, and trustees had been so accustomed to have everything their own way that they were not disposed to allow the interference of even a bishop. Bishop Connolly was not lacking in firmness but the great wants of his diocese made it necessary for him to fall in, to a certain extent, with the established order of things, and this exposed him afterwards to much difficulty and many humiliations. [\[14\]](#)



The bishop regularly visited various areas of his diocese and in 1816 made his way to Albany. He was surprised at the number of Catholics there. In June of that year, he wrote that he was enjoying good health, but heavy priestly duties barely left him time to say the Divine Office.[\[15\]](#)

Financial burdens were ever present. Connolly wrote on February 13, 1817, that he was unable to advance customs charges in New York for books held there. "At this moment," he wrote, "I am not in a condition to advance money for any person, as the Trustees of this congregation have assured me two days ago, that they have not at present in their hands money enough to pay me the salary due to me for those three months last passed."[\[16\]](#) Even church services were without elaborate decorations because of meager resources of the time. Losses from unforeseen circumstances could always be expected. Minutes of the Trustees of St. Patrick's of February 20, 1821, record that thieves broke into the cathedral, stealing \$300 worth of gold and silver, sacred articles and lace torn from vestments, as well as \$90 from the collection for the poor. After rewards were offered, the articles were found in the city canal.[\[17\]](#) The cathedral owed \$53,000, and having borrowed to build it, paid annual interest at seven percent. That financial burden prevented the bishop from supporting a sufficient number of priests. As a consequence, Connolly had to perform both night and day the duties of a parish priest, more than those of a bishop.[\[18\]](#)

Within a few years of his arrival, Connolly received some relief from his missionary activity with the coming of Irish priests. In October of 1817, Arthur Langdill came to serve.

Upstate, Charles D. Ffrench, O.P., arrived in early 1818 to minister throughout the diocese. William Taylor, who appeared the following June, was assigned to the Cathedral. To compensate for the withdrawal of Carbry, John Power arrived in 1819 and three years later assumed the duties of pastor of St. Peter's Church. Within a span of five years, 1820 to 1825, Connolly ordained five priests in New York. All were needed to serve the growing population.

With additional priestly help Connolly took the initiative to establish some schools for the young. He brought three of Mother Seton's Sisters of Charity to conduct an orphan asylum in a wooden building on Prince Street in June 1817. A famous woman singer of the day gave a concert in support of this project. Starting with five orphans, the asylum housed twenty-eight the following year, all boarded, clothed and educated by the sisters. In 1817 St. Patrick's Charity or Free School opened in the cathedral's basement, accommodating over 240 boys and girls. A similar school already existed at St. Peter's, educating 344 pupils that year. Both educational facilities were supported partly by the state and partly by the two congregations.

Shortages of personnel and funds were small problems compared to the serious and protracted difficulty Bishop Connolly faced with the trustee system. Modeled on European and Protestant practices, and used for legal expedencies in incorporating church properties, lay trustees had assumed wide responsibilities in local church governance in the absence of priestly personnel and church funds. Bishops and clergy, accustomed to traditional episcopal control, found serious threats to religious authority in the trustee system. Trustee difficulties began in New York with its first Catholic parish and continued despite ecclesiastical opposition. Connolly reacted promptly if not wisely, as judged by one student of the trustee situation:

Bishop Connolly was not well received by the New York City trustees nor did he do anything to win them over. In fact, having been warned about the trustees' dominance over the church prior to his coming to the United States, he did whatever he could to break the old trustees' stranglehold upon the Catholic community. Both St. Peter's and St. Patrick's were under one board of trustees. Many of these men had served as trustees for thirty years. In April of 1817 Connolly single-handedly dissolved the sole board of trustees, established two separate boards of trustees, one for St. Patrick's and the other for St. Peter's, and appointed illegally, trustees who were favorable to episcopal rule over the churches.[\[19\]](#)

The angry trustees who had been replaced looked for support among the clergy. They found it in Peter Malou, a Jesuit, and assistant pastor at St. Peter's. Malou engaged in a letter campaign, and a majority of anti-episcopal trustees were chosen in the regular annual board elections that followed in March 1818. Among the clergy supporting the bishop was Charles Ffrench, the pastor of St. Peter's. William Taylor, recently-arrived from Ireland and assistant at St. Patrick's, opposed Connolly for this handling of the situation – or apparent lack of it. So the battle lines of clerics as well as trustees were drawn. As the annual trustee elections approached, clerical campaigning intensified. Charles Ffrench and the poorer people supported the bishop while Anthony Malou and William Taylor and wealthier parishioners backed the incumbent trustees. Ffrench appealed in the pulpit, the pubs and the press for Connolly's candidates. The incumbent trustees were pictured as manipulators of power. The opposition lauded the incumbents as pillars of society who had financed parish activities over a long period of time.[\[20\]](#) With the trustee election of April 1819, the pro-episcopal camp received a plurality of 80 votes out of 300 cast. In addition Connolly gained three trustees at St. Peter's and five at St. Patrick's, although two of the latter were found ineligible. But that did not restore peace.

In Baltimore, Archbishop Maréchal declined the request of the New York trustees to intervene and instead asked the beleaguered Bishop Connolly to settle the matter. Connolly had protested formally at the meeting of October 22, 1819, against any other ecclesiastical interference in the concerns of New York without the express permission of the Pope. In consequence, he answered Maréchal:

... I am exceedingly sorry that it is not in my power ... to do or suggest anything likely to quiet the minds of the two contending parties here, whereas the major part of the trustees of our church of Saint Peter labour to deprive me of my spiritual rights, while the major part of the trustees of our cathedral, and the mass of our numerous congregation are intent on supporting me in the enjoyment of them ... Seeing, therefore the dispositions of their minds, I am persuaded that our disagreements will continue until next Easter Monday [1820] on which three of the trustees of Saint Peter's Church are to go out of office.... as I hope that these three new trustees will be men of moderation.[\[21\]](#)

After further elections of trustees who favored Connolly, and Malou's transfer to the Diocese of Boston, the greatest trial of the bishop ended. There is little doubt that those painful years took a toll on the health of John Connolly.

Active to the end, Connolly fell ill after attending a funeral on Tuesday February 1, 1825. Anticipating his death, he appointed John Power administrator of the diocese, and called to the cathedral Father John Shanahan, whom he had ordained the previous year. New York lost its bishop on the following Sunday evening. He lay in state at St. Peter's Church which was more convenient to visitors than St. Patrick's. It was estimated that 30,000 persons paid their last respects. Burial was at St. Patrick's on Wednesday, February 9. The bishop was eulogized for his prudent and unostentatious zeal. Although he was not known as a highly prized orator, yet his activities preached volumes to those who knew him best – the uneducated and the poor.

Upon his arrival in 1815, Connolly found only four priests and three churches, but he left his successor 35,000 Catholics in New York City alone, with 150,000 in the entire diocese and eight churches and eighteen priests.

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## NOTES

1. This chapter relies to a great extent upon the initial work of Dominican historian Victor O'Daniel (1868-1960) who left an eighty-page typescript in the archives of the Dominican Province of St. Joseph. He gathered primary sources in the United States and abroad to prepare the manuscript.
2. Peter Guilday, "Trusteeism in New York," **Historical Records and Studies** 28 (1928): 49.
3. Though sources differ on the date of his birth, O'Daniel ascertained from the Archbishop of Mechlin that 1751 was the correct year. O'Daniel Ms., hereafter referred to as ODMS, Saint Joseph Province Archives (SJP).
4. Leonard E. Boyle, **San Clemente Miscellany I: the Community of SS. Sisto e Clemente in Rome, 1677-1977**. Apud S. Clemente, 1977, 59.
5. Quoted in O'Daniel manuscript on Connolly, 239-240. Original is in Tallaght Archives. A province can have no more than twelve Masters of Sacred Theology at one time.
6. Anthony Cogan, *The Diocese of Meath, Ancient and Modern*, vol. 3 (Dublin: Joseph Dollard, 1870) 318-319.
7. Anthony Cogan, (1870) 234.
8. Carroll to Michele Di Pietro, Baltimore, June 17, 1807. Thomas O'Brien Hanley, ed., **The John Carroll Papers III** (CP) ((Notre Dame, In.: University of Notre Dame, 1976) 26.
9. John Carroll to John Troy, Baltimore, 1815, CP, vol. 3 312.
10. Carroll to Plowden, Baltimore, mid-1815, CP vol.3 338.
11. Ira Rosenwaike, **Population History of New York City** (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1972) 18.
12. James R. Bayley, **A Brief Sketch of the Early History of the Catholic Church on the Island of New York**, 2nd edition, (New York: United States Catholic Historical Society, revised 1973) 84-86.
13. Henry De Courcy, **The Catholic Church in the United States** (New York: Edward Dunigan and Brother, 1856) 384.
14. Bayley 83-86.
15. Connolly to Joseph Plessis, New York, June 7, 1816, **United States Catholic Historical Magazine**, vol. 4 (1892): 60.
16. **United States Catholic Historical Magazine**, vol.4, No.2 (1891-93): 193.
17. Mary Peter Carthy, **Old St. Patrick's New York's First Cathedral** (New York: United States Catholic Historical Society, 1947) 31.
18. John F. Maguire, **The Irish in America** (London: Longman's Green and Co., 1868) 370.
19. Patrick Carey, **People, Priests, and Prelates: Ecclesiastical Democracy and the Tensions of Trusteeism** (Notre Dame, In: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987) 134.
20. See Carey, **People, Priests and Prelates**, 134-135.
21. Guilday, "Trusteeism in New York" 57-58.