

Religion in Riverside: How Faith Defined Two Dutch Identities in One Neighborhood (1880-1920)

Talk given by Prof. Robert Schoone-Jongen, March 16, 2011, at Calvin College

In the decades between the Civil War and World War One, Paterson, New Jersey was an industrial boomtown. Its factories produced more silk fabric than any other place in the world except China. Its businessmen were consequential characters on the state and national scene. It was on the technological cutting edge in chemicals and dyestuffs, railroad locomotives, and textile-producing machinery. The city's residential neighborhoods sprawled in new areas, pushing agriculture out of the city's northern and eastern reaches back across the Passaic River into Bergen County. Immigrants dominated the city at both the top and the bottom of society. Most of the prominent dyers and silk manufacturers had come from England, France, and Germany; most of the unskilled labor arrived in waves, first from the Netherlands, England, and Germany, and later from France, Switzerland, Italy, and Poland, and finally from Turkey, Syria, and Armenia.

Paterson was the American success story. It occupied the river's northern most arc and spilled over onto the north bank and up the first foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. The influx of people spurred the construction of entire neighborhoods to house the immigrants, mostly in two- and three-family houses built within walking distance of the mills that mostly hugged the river. In common with most cities, the immigrants clustered in distinct enclaves, the Italians down near the Falls, the newcomers from the Ottoman domains in the South End, the Dutch in the northern reaches of Wrigley Park and the First Ward. Beginning in the 1880s, the Dutch reached a second critical mass capable of organizing and sustaining new social institutions, especially churches. Among these in Riverside, two took deep root, the Fourth Christian Reformed Church and the parish of Our Lady of Lourdes.

This account is a work in progress, by no means the last word on the subject. The most tantalizing evidence for my story comes from the federal census records, some brief histories of Our Lady of Lourdes parish, the membership records and anniversary histories of Fourth Church, and contemporary press clippings and historical accounts about the role Riverside's resident priest, Father Stein, played in the great Paterson Silk Strike of 1913. Of particular interest are the marriage patterns that appear in the census

reports. In addition we will briefly look at the difference religion made in how the Protestant and Catholic Dutchmen reacted to the Silk Strike of 1913 and then look at what became of Fourth Church and Lourdes when the Dutch moved on to other places in the area.

We can start with a search of two websites that seem to have little in common except the terms “church” and “New Jersey.” The first is that of Faith Community Christian Reformed Church located at 530 Sicomac Avenue in suburban Wyckoff. Their building is partially obscured by a renovated dairy barn that once housed the Sicomac Dairy. Amid the links to the church calendar, the weekly bulletin, and contact information is a picture of the cornerstone with the date 1978 and a verse from John 14, “Jesus said: I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” This picture is the only obvious hint that the congregation has a history. The other website is maintained by Our Lady of Lourdes Roman Catholic Church located at 440 River Street in Paterson, just six miles to the south of Faith Community, and a historical leap of about 125 years into the past. The site opens with the proclamation, “Here Miracles Happen Every Day.” The “Our Parish” button opens to this proclamation. “Our Lady of Lourdes Parish was founded in 1882 to serve the ‘New Immigrants, the Poor, and all the people of Riverside,’ Paterson, NJ. We have consistently served the local community, especially the poor and the newly arrived immigrants and continue to do so today! While most of our parishioners move on to better lives in better parishes, they become the financial and spiritual backbone of these parishes and thus support the local, diocesan, and universal church. We are please [sic] to LAUNCH [sic] the second generation of Catholics even though we continue to live with the poor.”

As different as these two churches seem to be at first glance, Lourdes and Faith Community arose from the same ethnic group that began to settle in Paterson’s Riverside neighborhood in the 1850s. Peter Botbyl was one of the first arrivals. He became a farmer on the slopes of the Passaic River, raising produce that he peddled in the streets and markets of the city for more than fifty years. Whether the worshippers in Wyckoff realize it or not, they gather on Sundays because of Botbyl and about ten other Dutch immigrants who decided it was time to plant a Christian Reformed church in the city’s northern reaches. At the other edge of Riverside during the 1870s, other Dutch immigrants began to settle into new, inexpensive houses that lined the two railroad lines that tied Paterson to upstate New York and the Pennsylvania coalfields. They did not need a homegrown leader to start a church since these people were under the watchful eyes of

Catholic clergy who believed immigrants should have churches that ministered in the vernaculars they understood. If the residents of Riverside spoke Dutch, that language would grace the homilies in their church.

In wake of the Civil War, Paterson was a burgeoning industrial town. Between 1860 and 1910, the city's population jumped from around 19,000 to more than 125,000 residents. The Dutch constituted more 11% of that number in 1910. Their influence was amplified by being concentrated in a few narrowly defined enclaves located to the north of the central business district. In 1900 they constituted 40% of the 11,000 inhabitants in the North Ward and 15% of the 23,000 residents of the Third Ward where Peter Botbyl lived and the Catholic prelates decided to build a church for the Dutch. Within those two wards the Dutch were not evenly distributed, but lived in compact islands, census districts in which they constituted 60% or more of the residents. That is where the churches were placed.

Between 1880 and 1920, Catholicism in Paterson meant Dean William A. McNulty. He had fled the Irish potato famine in 1849, arrived in New York, studied for the priesthood, and was assigned to Paterson's St. John's Church in 1863. A prodigious fundraiser and missionary, McNulty founded parishes and built numerous churches to house the congregations, as well as seminaries, orphanages, convents, and St. Joseph's Hospital during his fifty-nine years in the city. When in 1922 the dean finally died at the age of 93, the city literally shutdown for his funeral. In 1882, McNulty decided that Riverside needed a parish for the Dutch, German, and Belgian immigrants who were moving there. Since St. Boniface, where they had been affiliated, was too far away to be accessible, McNulty selected several lots on a wedge-shaped block between River and Butler Streets for the new Our Lady of Lourdes parish. He ordered the moving of a church building from the East Side to Riverside, a building dedicated on September 3, 1882, by St. Boniface's priest, Father Nicholas Hens, and later consecrated by Bishop Winand Wigger on May 14, 1883. That fall the Our Lady of Lourdes School opened its doors, with a fee schedule of 50¢ per month for a first child, two children for 75¢, and three or more for \$1.00. In 1890 a convent to house the Dominican Sisters who were assigned to teach in the school was erected next door. A diocesan historian later wrote, "So diverse was the ethnic composition in the 'Dutch Hill' section of Paterson that the homily on the

dedication day was preached in English in the morning, German in the afternoon, and Dutch in the evening.”¹

For the first fifteen years between 1885 and 1900, the parish’s first resident priest, Fr. Alphonse M. Schaeken, delivered the Dutch homilies. When he arrived at Lourdes he assumed responsibility for a flock of almost 800 souls. Schaeken was a native of the Netherlands who had received his seminary training in Louvain. Upon arriving in the United States, he had been assigned to a succession of parishes in the northern half of New Jersey before his appointment to Lourdes. With the congregation growing ever larger, McNulty and Bishop Wigger (himself a German immigrant) ordered Schaeken to raise funds to build a more elaborate church building. His efforts failed so badly that he asked to be transferred to a new parish. In 1900 he received his wish and moved to Jersey City, where he spent the remainder of his days as a priest.

Bishop Wigger took a special interest in Lourdes. He was convinced that the Catholic Church had no choice but to provide ethnic pastors in ethnic parishes if it hoped to retain the loyalty of the immigrants that were swarming into places like Paterson. It was Wigger who ordered that high mass homilies be delivered in German and Dutch, with English being relegated to weekday services. He also commanded, under pain of excommunication, that all Catholics send their children to parochial schools. In addition he assigned the Redemptorist Fathers to take charge of catechetical instruction at Lourdes and teach the classes in rotation among English, German, and Dutch. By 1910 the parish’s membership had swelled to 3,996.

Meanwhile the Dutch Protestants of Riverside continued to trek to the old enclave in Wrigley Park for services at First Christian Reformed Church, or one of the four Dutch-speaking Reformed congregations in that vicinity. In about 1893, the First Church consistory decided it would be good to hold local Sunday school classes for the children of Riverside. The neighborhood’s growth was spurred by construction of a trolley car line on River Street, a line that connected the center of Paterson with Bergen County’s growing suburbs. Low cost housing increasingly occupied the farmland Peter Botbyl and others like him had been tilling since before the Civil War. In addition some of the largest dye houses in the

¹ Raymond J. Kupke, *Living Stones: A History of The Catholic Church in The Diocese of Paterson*. Clifton: Diocese of Paterson, 1987, p. 139.

United States were being built along side the Passaic River, encouraging Riverside's development into a distinctly blue collar neighborhood.

On May 20, 1896, Botbyl chaired a meeting and then led a delegation to ask permission to organize a Christian Reformed congregation in Riverside. They did not receive a warm welcome since their plea rested solely on the inconvenience the petitioners experienced in walking to the two other congregations that existed to the south. Rev. Peter Van Vlaanderen of First Church believed the entire city should be supervised by one consistory, rather than allowing the flocks to be separated into independent bodies. But Botbyl and his friends persisted by appealing to Classis Hudson for support. When classis agreed that a church in Riverside would be a good thing, an organizational meeting was promptly called for October 1, 1896. Thirteen families appeared and became the charter members of Fourth Church. The first consistory included a cake baker, carpenter, butcher, and storekeeper. Three of them lived in Riverside, while the butcher lived across the river in Bergen County.

The first services were held on October 4, 1896, in the local Methodist chapel. The consistory was formally installed on October 20, and the congregation began to consider the location of a permanent home. Their first choice slipped away when the property owner received a larger offer from someone who wished to build a saloon on the site. In addition Paterson, like much of the nation, was still feeling the grip of the "Cleveland" depression that had begun in 1893. Raising funds in the face of soup kitchens and low wages was a challenge. With no money, the congregation built its first building at the corner of 4th Ave. and 16th St., via a carpenter's lien and deferred payments, plus pew rents charged for the right to occupy the used benches purchased from a church in Bergen County. All the work was supervised by two Dutch contractors. During 1898, the congregation attracted its first full time minister, Rev. Peter Kosten, from Alto, Wisconsin. Riverside was not the kind of place that would attract someone from the denomination's A-team of ministers. A subsequent history of the congregation described Kosten as "...not a man of great talents, and his education was limited, but he was a sincere servant of God, who worked with zeal and consecration." Within five years he concluded that life in Borculo, Michigan would be preferable to life in Paterson.

During the next ten years the congregation kept renovating their spartan building, installed a pipe organ (the organist was paid by being given a free pew), and added a bell tower. The opening of a Christian

day school in the church basement in 1899 helped attract more members. At first the school functioned as School B of the Amity Street Christian School. In 1901, the school moved to a separate building and organized a separate board in 1906. The Riverside Christian School would serve the community until it closed in 1960.

When Fourth Church observed its tenth anniversary, the membership had grown to more the 500. The building was too small, another minister had come and gone in about four years time, and the congregation's financial condition reflected the members' income from work in the dye houses and silk mills. In 1910, one minister responded to a call by informing the consistory that he would not serve a congregation that was financially troubled and supporting a struggling school. When Rev. Jan Robberts arrived in 1911, he and his family were carried from the railroad to the parsonage in two coaches borrowed from the Vermeulen Funeral Home. When he left after only a six-month stay, Robberts agreed to repay his moving expenses. But during his brief tenure the congregation voted to build another church, more than twice the size of the original building, borrow more than half the cost of construction from a bank that numbered among its officers one of Peter Botbyl's sons, and hire five Dutch contractors (Hoitsma, Schotanus, Vermeulen, DeRonde, and Bruinsma) to do all the work, except the painting. In 1920 the congregation's membership peaked at more than 700.

Both Our Lady of Lourdes and Fourth Christian Reformed Church had a profound influence on their members. One was in the realm of marriage patterns. Using the United States Census reports, details their respective marriage patterns emerge. Of course the census works much better for tracing sons rather than daughters, but the results are still instructive. Among those who attended Fourth Church, the children of Dutch immigrants married the children of other Dutch immigrants almost exclusively. To be Dutch meant attending the Christian Reformed church and marrying someone else who shared both ethnic and religious heritage. For instance, one of the largest extended families in Fourth Church in 1910 was the Kuikens (three Richards, plus, Lyman, Henry, Jacob, Arthur, Aaron, and Martin). They had migrated to Paterson from Friesland during the 1890s and produced a large contingent of sons. In 1910 they included several dye house workers, a storekeeper, a produce farmer and peddler, a butcher, and a file cutter. The heads of eleven of the twelve Kuiken households (spanning three generations) listed in Passaic and Bergen counties were all married to other Hollanders. The odd one was married to the American-born daughter of

an Irish immigrant. They lived apart from all the others in the Borough of Glen Rock. Among the other eleven families, William Kuiken's came the closest to a mixed marriage. He is listed as Holland-Frisian, while his wife, Lena, is listed as Holland-Dutch. Ten years later there are twenty-two Kuiken households in the same general area. By then they had added "contractor" to their occupations, but their marriage pattern remained unchanged. Only two the households included a spouse not of Dutch background. My yet-to-be-completed work on the 1930 census yields only one more third-generation household with a non-Dutch spouse.

On other hand, among those who affiliated with Our Lady of Lourdes, there were notable differences. One can be seen in the households of those who actually emigrated from the Netherlands. In 1900 in the Third Ward and concentrated almost exclusively within walking distance of the church on Butler Street were nineteen households in which one spouse was listed as being born in the Netherlands and the other being born in Belgium. Then there are the four De Long families who lived within a few blocks of Lourdes. In only one instance were husband and wife both born in the Netherlands. The other three married wives of German-Swiss, Irish, and German backgrounds. Ten years later the De Long families living in the shadow of Lourdes were married to spouses of Polish, German, Irish, and French background. Or, Samuel Bomeline. He had been born in Belgium but his wife, Mary, was of Dutch background. They immigrated to the United States in 1880 from the Netherlands with two sons, August and Henry. August married a Hollander; Henry's wife came from England.

Something different was at work among those who attended Lourdes. In first place, Dutch Catholics left the Netherlands with a much lower sense of having been included in Dutch society. As a marginalized religious minority, that would be understandable. Also, given their proximity to the Belgian border, contacts back and forth would have been be more likely. The religious affinities that Dutch Catholics had with their Belgian cousins were a factor in marriage patterns even before they left for the United States. Upon arrival in places like Riverside, the Dutch Catholics could receive the sacraments from someone such as Fr. Schaeken, someone who could hear confessions in their native language and deliver homilies with familiar words, and the immigrants' children could learn their catechism in the parent language as well. But the purpose behind all this was not to help them remain Dutch, but to ensure that they remained Roman Catholic. Catholicism transcended their ethnic identities, at least in the eyes of the

church. Bishop Wigger's creation of a place like Lourdes did maintain the Dutch immigrants loyal to the church, but at the cost of whatever sense of Dutchness they may have had. And so their children could comfortably marry fellow Catholics of whatever ethnic background. So the marriage component that helped maintain a fierce sense of Dutchness among the Fourth Church members helped diminish that identity among the folks at Lourdes. Meanwhile within the first few decades, four sons of the Dutch immigrants were attracted to the priesthood and received ordination. One of them, William Van Zale, served as the assistant at Lourdes before serving other parishes in the Paterson area.

It is also useful to look at the role each church's resident clergyman played in the climactic Paterson Silk Strike of 1913. When the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) shut down the mills in February 1913, no one in authority could ignore what was happening as the pay envelopes stopped coming and the violence increased throughout the summer. Fourth Church's minister that year was Roelof Bolt. He had arrived in Riverside during January of 1912. His three-year tenure in the pulpit would coincide with the increasingly loud demands for English-language preaching services. This he was not prepared to do. Himself an immigrant from Groningen, he did not believe his facility with English would allow him to convey his thoughts as effectively as he could in Dutch. So when the great strike began, he could not effectively speak to the issues, except in Dutch. He, along with the other Christian Reformed ministers of the city, spoke out against the strike in language that at times bordered on the apocalyptic. They denounced the strike because of the ferociously anti-religious rhetoric of the syndicalist leaders of the strike. The violence that erupted in the streets between Lourdes and Fourth Church certainly did not help the cause in the eyes of Bolt. And when a stray bullet killed an Italian immigrant living in Riverside, the IWW seized control of the funeral to transform it into a propaganda parade that stretch all the way to the Catholic cemetery in Totowa where the victim was buried. Nowhere in the surviving accounts of the ministers' thoughts is there a hint that maybe the silk workers had legitimate grievances against the mill owners. The strike was evil incarnate, and maybe even a sign that the Second Coming was in the offing.

Meanwhile over at Our Lady of Lourdes, the resident priest became one of the most visible champions of arbitration. Father Anthony Stein was the American-born son of a German saloonkeeper. Stein's seminary training coincided with a significant shift in Catholic Church attitudes toward the modern world, a shift that was embodied in Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *De Rerum Novarum*. Stein had arrived at

Lourdes in 1900, assigned to the parish to replace Father Schaeken. While Dutch Protestants kept arriving in Paterson from the Netherlands right up until the outbreak of the First World War, the Dutch Catholic tide subsided. But Father Stein continued the policy of founding new parishes for each ethnic group that gained a foothold in the northern sections of Paterson. He organized two parishes for the Italians and one each for the Poles and Lithuanians. When the strike turned into a protracted siege between the IWW and the mill owners, Father Stein spearheaded a movement among the city's clergy to form a committee that would listen to both sides and then offer a compromise to end the strike. Stein made it clear that while he objected to the IWW's revolutionary rhetoric, the violence it inspired, and the anti-religious sentiments that the strikes' leaders openly expressed, he also believed that the mill owners' greed had created the environment that precipitated the walkout. He believed his parishioners had good reason to resent the wages and the hours the owners demanded of them.

Stein's attempt to arbitrate the strike failed. Believing both that the strike was the inspiration of outside agitators and that the owners had the right to run their businesses, he satisfied neither side. But he had publicly espoused the legitimate grievances of his parishioners in their dark hour. During 1914, when the federal Commission on Industrial Relations arrived in Paterson to investigate the strike, Stein appeared as a witness and reaffirmed his twin beliefs in both justice for the workers and the property rights of the mill owners. Apparently his refusal to unilaterally side with the owners cost him his position at Lourdes. In 1915, Dean McNulty reassigned Stein to serve as rector of St. Joseph's church in the city, at least in part due to the antipathy certain mill owners continued to express toward his work in the Riverside neighborhood.

Insularity, on the one hand, and a failed attempt to be relevant in a broader context: that seems to be the lesson to be learned from how Father Stein and Reverend Bolt coped with the great strike. And without being sweeping in pushing this story to an end, this seems a good place to quickly look across almost a hundred years to find our way back to the two websites I mentioned at the start. Both churches began with much in common, but also with fundamental differences.

That Lourdes and Fourth had anything in common would be a jarring thought to those of us who grew up on the Protestant side of the divide after the Second World War. When Eastern Christian High School took to the basketball floor against one of the Catholic schools that once covered the city and

diocese, the EC's coach lead his players from the locker room with the admonition, "Be careful guys. Tonight we are going to re-fight the Reformation." One of the high schools they played was the one maintained by the St. Joseph's Parish, the one Father Stein served after he left Lourdes. The one commonality I remember was the knowledge that in the annual Don Bosco Technical High School Holiday Tournament, an event played in a renovated silk mill, EC would be paired in the first round with a Catholic school that was sure to lose, so that the Eastern Christian fans would reappear for two more nights to boost Don Bosco's coffers. Then in my sophomore year the priest from St. Lukes' parish in Ho-Ho-Kos was invited to speak to our chapel. Maybe at that point the Reformation battles began to subside into skirmishes on the basketball court, a space that at Eastern Christian bore a remarkable resemblance to the sunken floor of the Roman Coliseum. But in conclusion let's look back to Riverside.

Fourth Christian Reformed Church was started by and for a particular group of Dutch immigrants who happened to reside within walking distance, or buggy ride, of the Riverside neighborhood. They viewed their church as something they created, something they built, something they owned. They were the church. With time they fulfilled the Riverside destiny mentioned in the website for Our Lady of Lourdes. The Dutch Protestants moved on to better places and left Riverside behind. Right after the Second World War the consistory began thinking about relocating elsewhere, somewhere in Bergen County on the other side of the river. Those stretches of farmland were rapidly being transformed into tract houses and subdivisions that attracted people with the means to move to them. Those solid sons of Fourth Church, the Kuiken brothers, were instrumental in this march to the suburbs as they built the houses that rose in the Borough of Fair Lawn, and then sold the hardware and lumber that the homeowners used for their do-it-yourself projects on weekends. The debate over Fourth Church's future ended when a fire broke out in the building on a windy April Saturday in 1975. Within an hour or so the roof came crashing down on everything except the pipe organ. Sadly a Paterson city fireman was killed in the collapse. After a prolonged discussion, the congregation metamorphosed into Faith Community, purchased land in an upscale suburb, erected a new church, and installed the old organ as an interior reminder of where they had come from. Many of the surnames in the church directory are those that once filled the pages of booklets that bore the name "Fourth Christian Reformed Church of Paterson, New Jersey."

Meanwhile, during the 1920s the church Father Schaeken had been unable to build became a reality. Our Lady of Lourdes built its new church on the opposite side of the wedge-shaped lots Dean McNulty had purchased in 1882. Instead of facing Butler Street, the church now faces River Street, the one of the main thoroughfares of the Riverside neighborhood. From the front stairs the hills, the house, and the suburbs inhabited by some of the descendents of the first parishioners are clearly visible. When the Dutch and Belgians moved away in the years between the world wars, some of them bought new houses from the Kuiken brothers who went to Fourth Church. Now the language of the streets is Spanish. But Lourdes still does what it was intended to do since its founding in 1882, as the website I mentioned at the start said.