

PRESS PROGRESS

1889—The Catholic Journal Cradles Catholic Journalism in Rochester—1929

BY WILLARD A. MARAKLE

Perhaps one of the most cherished prerogatives embodied within the spirit of America is the right of youth to nurture great ambitions.

That is why a job printer, Edward J. Ryan; a journeyman typesetter, Thomas H. Donovan, and a cub reporter, who was myself—with only high hopes but no capital—resolved to start a Catholic newspaper in Rochester fifty years ago, in the distant pioneering days of 1889.

It was the reason that we three, with hearts beating a little faster than usual, were on the doorsteps of the episcopal residence of the great first Ordinary of Rochester, the Most Rev. Bernard J. McQuaid, one evening in that year to tell him of our plans and ask for official recognition and support.

Acting as spokesman for the group, I introduced myself, telling him I was a member of the staff of the Union and Advertiser, then presented my friends and indicated their occupations.

Without further preliminaries I told Bishop McQuaid that we wanted to start a Catholic newspaper in Rochester and said we were willing to give up our leisure time for that purpose.

Both Mr. Ryan and Mr. Donovan joined in explaining the project, supplementing my remarks and telling of the hours that we had spent together in enthusiastic contemplation of it.

They said that my experience as a reporter qualified me to accept the responsibility of editing the paper.

With attentive interest, but with impassive countenance, Bishop McQuaid listened as the story was unfolded. When we had finished and a lull came in the conversation he began to ask questions of his now excited narrators. One was of primary importance: "What is your capital?"

Chagrined, but not discouraged by what had been expected, for we had gone over that phase of the subject, I replied:

"If you speak in terms of ready cash, we have none. But we all have our spare time and journalistic experience to contribute to the project."

"Mr. Ryan is a printer and has a small office at Main Street and East Avenue. He is willing to lend his printing press to the cause. Mr. Donovan has acquired a considerable journalistic experience because of his connection with the Rural Weekly at Mount Morris, where he is employed. Both are willing to lend their talents to the establishment of a Catholic newspaper here."

Bishop McQuaid leaned forward and, having made a thoughtful appraisal of our plan, looked straight at me with far-seeing eyes that revealed deep understanding of what we had in mind.

He went to the heart of the subject, telling of the difficulties that would be encountered and of the complications which would ensue if we became involved in the undertaking.

The fate of other Catholic newspapers was pictured.

What chance would a Catholic newspaper have here? There could be no question about the answer . . . it would be a daring venture even to try to get one started. No . . . the Bishop could not give his approval as the diocesan newspaper.

Our hearts sank as Bishop McQuaid went on.

Through one of the fortuitous whims of circumstance, the first editor of the Catholic Courier—and one of its three youthful founders of fifty years ago—is present at its Golden Jubilee to write the story of its beginning. He is Willard A. Marakle, Assistant State Industrial Commissioner of the State Department of Labor in charge of the Rochester district. Mr. Marakle was a nationally known journalist one of the great reporters of our time—who recorded scores of national historic events while they were in the making as news; the friend and confidant of such leaders as President Theodore Roosevelt, Chauncey M. Depew, Alfred E. Smith, Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes and others.—Editor's Note.

To approve the proposed paper as the diocesan paper would mean that he would have to correct personally all important articles appearing in the publication. That would be impossible because his hours were already crowded with the pressure of other duties and he could not find time for new responsibilities.

Bishop McQuaid must have noticed that our spirits were drooping; the zero point of discouragement must have been revealed in our changed expressions.

He hastened to reassure us, to revive our enthusiasm.

Willing hearts counted more than financial backing, he told us, and the success of every great undertaking depends upon the spirit of those promoting it. We listened with returning courage and enthusiasm as Bishop McQuaid said he was interested and would give us moral support and promised that all Catholic news which came to his attention would be saved for us.

"The day of the Catholic press is coming," he concluded. "I congratulate you as pioneers in the field of Catholic journalism by laymen."

The interview was ended. We returned to our homes, planning each step of the way: dreaming of it through short hours of sleep which followed, then returned to our separate places of employment.

It was not long before we came to realize that the work connected with getting out a Catholic newspaper was more extensive than we had supposed. But memorable, exciting days followed.

After our regular daily occupations were completed, we hurried

to the little printing office to prepare another publication for the world—writing, setting the type, putting it into forms.

We three young newspaper enthusiasts took turns in manipulating the hand press while 1,000 copies of the new paper were being printed, and when it was finished it was loaded into a hand cart, pushed along the way down Main Street to the Post Office, and the clerk who had waited there for hours to receive the new addition to the newspaper world—the Catholic Journal.

On October 5, 1889—at the same table where he ate the warm-ed over dinner—Bishop McQuaid was proudly reading its first issue. So were a great many other Catholics throughout Rochester, because hundreds of sample copies had been sent out.

There were only four pages in the paper, each sheet of five columns. Advertisements, more subscribers were needed. They were to be had only through persistent work, but this had been done after regular working hours.

Because the paper was not a paying proposition we kept our positions. We had hoped to make some money with it—to divide the profits three ways—but that was impossible.

When anything was left over it was, with my hearty approval given to my partners who did the mechanical work. My compensation was the rich experience which I was gaining as editor—the fun that I got out of the work.

The new paper was attracting attention but growth came slowly. Through occupying the post of editor of the Journal—and report-

er on a daily paper—I was brought into close relationship with Bishop McQuaid and came to understand his true greatness.

He was the most distinguished American prelate of his time—seemed almost the Archbishop of the United States, since he had consecrated so many of the younger Archbishops and Bishops.

I learned about writing from him. One day he said to me:

"Simple language, expressed clearly, is the best. Remember some may read no other publication. Speak to them in their own language—in words of one syllable when possible. Those who seek 'literature' with big words may find it in books and magazines. Let them go there for it."

Sometimes blunt, with seeming gruffness, Bishop McQuaid was the embodiment of kindness—a great soul whose memory is a proud heritage of my early years as editor of the Catholic Journal.

He was our friend through all of the trials of those trying years, and without his friendship and wise counsel we never would have been able to keep the publication going.

We had lots of good will but no money.

Advertising revenues remained small; the subscription list expanded slowly, and only the suggestions of our loyal Bishop enabled us to find ways to meet the expenses.

When word came in 1890 that Catholic editors had arranged for a meeting in Cincinnati to organize a Catholic Press Association—and I wanted to go—it provoked a council of war.

There was no money in the treasury.

But newspaper men could get passes on the railroads in those days and I concluded that I could dig up enough money to pay hotel expenses. Accordingly it was decided that I was to go to the convention as the representative of the Catholic Journal.

During the pleasant journey on the train I fell in with a Catholic priest, learned that he was on the way to the editors' meeting in Cincinnati, and that his birthplace was at Watertown, N. Y., where I was also born.

Out of that meeting—and subsequent meetings at the convention—developed a friendship with the Most Rev. Joseph H. Conroy, later to become Bishop of Ogdensburg, which lasted until his death last year.

At that time he was rector of St. Mary's Cathedral in Ogdensburg and was trying to make a Catholic newspaper out of the Ogdensburg Courier.

During discussions at our meeting it was agreed that the Catholic newspaper rated low on the journalistic ladder; that their editors lacked prestige—and most of them were in the red.

Although the convention was long on resolutions and speeches it accomplished little toward solution of the difficulties with which we were confronted. There was an exchange of experiences, but the conclusion was that about all a Catholic paper could expect to do was to get out of the red.

Vast chains and syndicates had not taken life at that period in journalistic history. The Associated Press and other press associations had not come into existence, and there were no columnists.

Each newspaper was an independent enterprise, getting its own news. There was little complaining at the convention and each editor planned to return to his office and carry on as before.

Evenings found Mr. Donovan setting the type for the Catholic Journal, while I helped turn the hand press. We took turns in wrapping and addressing the completed product and also in wheeling it to the Post Office on the office handcart.

Although Bishop McQuaid made good his promise to be a friend of the paper, encouraging the support of priests of the diocese, and its circulation increased, its revenue would not permit the founders to leave their regular employment.

After five years as editor, I retired, and the editorship was taken over by Mr. Donovan.

But revenues were insufficient, and when an opportunity came to Mr. Donovan to become editor of the Catholic Chronicle at Albany he severed his connection with it and Mr. Ryan took over the paper.

Through succeeding years—as long as he lived—Mr. Ryan daily went to the office of the paper in Andrews Street and continued to get out the publication which had marked the initiation of the Catholic press in America by laymen, making a fine contribution to its advance.

His death came in 1929—after forty years with the paper—when Maurice F. Sammons became editor and the name of the paper was changed to the Catholic Courier and Journal.

FINIS

On the following pages the historical record of the Catholic Courier and its predecessors is brought up-to-date by other writers. See Pages 66, 67 and 73.

Dates and Data

Family Tree

THE CATHOLIC COURIER did not come into existence full-grown. Its earliest forerunner was the Catholic West End Journal, published in 1876 as the first local Catholic newspaper. In 1889 the Catholic Journal was established. Forty years later it became the Catholic Courier and Journal and, at the same time, official newspaper of the Rochester Diocese.

New Life

THE YEAR OF 1932 found the newspaper succumbing to depression condition. New thinking, new management, new technique, were needed imperatively. Reorganization was begun during the ebb-tide of the business cycle,—without funds, without widespread support, without encouraging precedents. The crisis was met with ideas, enthusiasm, and a new concept of Catholic journalism.

Growth

A PERIOD OF disheartening decline . . . and then the beginning of a new cycle. Growth began! Not suddenly, startlingly, but slowly and surely and steadily. New ways and means brought into being a new and better kind of Catholic newspaper, a publication worthy of its mission and of its status. Here is the whole story of how the CATHOLIC COURIER at last could flourish in the sun of its own achievement.