

St. Charles Borromeo Parish Founded In Greece Township 25 Years Ago

Silver Jubilee Parish Endured Great Depression, Tragic Fire

St. Charles Borromeo Parish in the Dewey Avenue section of the Township of Greece, a suburban area flanking Rochester on the northwest, is now twenty-five years old. Formal observation of the Silver Jubilee will be held Sunday (Nov. 25) morning at 11 o'clock when His Excellency Bishop Kearney will preside at Solemn Mass which Father Robert Keleher, pastor, will celebrate.

Today St. Charles Borromeo parish is a well-organized and continuously growing organization, but parishioners recall that the long pathway to the present peak of development was often beset with grim hours of discouragement and disappointment.

When the parish was launched a quarter of a century ago, nobody realized that the nation was on the eve of the worst economic depression in its history. So, debt-ridden, as is usually the case with most new churches, the infant parish of St. Charles had scarcely begun to toddle on its own when the long years of depression began to harass its struggling steps of progress.

Still fresh, too, in the memories of many is that ill-fated day during the Holy Week of 1933 when a disastrous fire swept the school and damaged the church.

UNDAUNTED BY such heart-breaking difficulties, priests and people carried on with determined courage. Today they are rightfully proud of their church plant, particularly their new modern school which boasts a current enrollment of 796 pupils.

The detailed story of St. Charles parish is told in a newly written booklet which chronicles the following facts:

In the early part of the twentieth century it became increasingly evident that a large residential section was going to spring up in the area surrounding Kodak Park, particularly north and west. To provide for the Catholics among this increased population, the new parish of St. Charles Borromeo was established August 5, 1925, by the late Bishop Thomas F. Hickey, second Bishop of Rochester.

The Reverend John M. Sellinger was appointed to be the first pastor. Boundaries of the parish were set in the general area west of the Genesee River as far as Mt. Read Blvd., between Winchester St. and Britton Road. The new parish was expected to relieve the strain on the surrounding parishes of Sacred Heart on the South, St. John's on the West, Mother of Sorrows and Holy Cross on the North.

BECAUSE OF the lack of buildings the first recorded events of St. Charles took place in Sacred Heart parish. Included among these was the first baptism that of Virginia Theresa Shea daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Shea of 99 Shelton Drive. Father Sellinger lived at Sacred Heart Rectory while preparing for the establishment of the new parish and while inspecting various sites for the new church property.

After some deliberation the choice finally fell upon the John Sheehan farm property at Dewey Avenue and Maiden Lane. Negotiations were made and the purchase was sealed on December 1, 1925 when \$200.00 was given to Frank Dobson and \$800.00 to W. N. Britton.

July 4, 1926 was a happy day for parishioners of St. Charles because it marked the laying of the cornerstone of the first church and school. Bishop Hickey officiated. No copy of the sermon preached by the Bishop on that occasion has been preserved for us. We may suppose, however, that he told of his trip to Milan, after his "ad limina" visit to Rome in 1924, and of repeated story in the days of his retirement.

At Milan he was so impressed with the living memory of the two great saints who had labored there that he determined, in erecting new parishes in his own diocese, he would dedicate one to the great St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan in the 4th century, and another to the courageous St. Charles Borromeo, Bishop of Milan in the 16th century.

THE COLLECTION taken up at the laying of the cornerstone amounted to the generous sum of \$1264.25.

After the cornerstone laying work on the building proceeded



REV. JOHN LYNCH
Assistant



REV. JOHN NORRIS
Assistant

rapidly Father Sellinger was anxious to open the new St. Charles Borromeo school for the fall term. The faculty from the beginning was composed of the Sisters of Mercy, Sister M. Frances, present principal of Mercy High School, was the first principal. As yet without a convent, the Sisters committed daily from the Motherhouse at nearby St. John's Park. At its completion the construction cost of the Church School building amounted to \$59,696.46.

NOW THAT the school and church were functioning Father Sellinger turned his attention to a parish rectory. On the property there was a small farm house facing on Dewey Avenue (the present rectory) which he felt could be remodeled into a building sufficiently ample for living quarters and small offices for parochial work. In 1927 the job of remodeling and refurbishing the new rectory was completed at a cost of approximately \$10,000.

It was not long before the parish suffered growing pains. Many new houses were built within the confines of the parish. No doubt the fact that there was a new Catholic school in the Dewey Stone district led an increasing number of Catholic families to settle in the area. Early in 1928 it became evident that the school was a real necessity. To accommodate the increasing number of students the size of the new students an addition was built on to the school at a cost of over \$15,000. This provided the necessary room but the parish with a \$93,000 debt and an annual revenue of \$16,000 was in a precarious position to face the financial crash of 1929.

In order to accommodate the growing congregation it was necessary to add another Mass on Sundays. Almost from the beginning Father Sellinger had been assisted on weekends by a priest

sent from the chancery, no one priest coming regularly. But in September of 1929 Father Victor Mills, O.S.M. came as the first regularly-assigned assistant.

With the parish well under way, Bishop John Francis O'Hern, successor to Bishop Hickey, had new work for Father Sellinger. He was assigned to be Newman Club Director for the students at the University of Rochester. It meant breaking new ground again in another field of priestly endeavor and one in which he succeeded well with his ever-ready zeal and enthusiasm. To leave the new parish which he had founded, however, must have been a difficult struggle for, as always, Father Sellinger had formed warm friendships. The attachments remained for the rest of his life. He died as Chaplain of Craig Colony, Oct. 12, 1945, and in his last will and testament he assigned a generous portion of his small estate to St. Charles Borromeo Church.

FATHER WILLIAM A. Doran, then chaplain of St. Mary's Hospital, was assigned by Bishop O'Hern to be the new pastor. He was installed on November 1, 1929. Father Doran brought with him an earnest zeal to accomplish great things for the struggling, growing parish. Besides the day in, day out, priestly care of souls, Father Doran's immediate task was to seek some means of liquidating the parish debt. It was no easy task in view of post-war inflation.

In August of 1930 the late Father Daniel S. Sullivan was appointed as the first full-time resident assistant to the parish. He was succeeded the following June by Father Eugene B. Hudson who was soon assigned to lighter labors on the Catholic diocesan paper because of failing health.

Difficult though it was to retard the growing debt, Father Doran felt that it was unjust that the Sisters of Mercy who had been laboring so zealously in the school should have to continue commuting daily to and from the Mercy Motherhouse at St. John's Park. Sister Monica was principal of the school at the time having replaced Sister Hilary the second principal. But as yet the parish had no convent.

In the minutes of a meeting of the board of trustees of the parish on June 10, 1931 we read: "The plans of the new convent have been approved the site determined the bids opened and the contract awarded." In due time Father Doran was happy to announce that the modern and spacious convent was open for inspection. The parishioners were very proud of the new building and made great sacrifices to help meet expenses.

MEANWHILE THE school registration was increasing and it became necessary again to arrange for more school rooms. In September of 1931 Father Doran was able to buy a portable school for the nominal sum of \$25.00, which was erected by the voluntary labor of parishioners at a total cost of only \$78.62.

In April, 1932, Bishop O'Hern sent to Father Doran the energetic Father James Sheridan as assistant. For the two and a half years of his assignment Father Sheridan proved active among the young people particularly and cultivated a strong devotion to St. Anthony. He was succeeded by Father Edward McKay who served as assistant pastor during 1935. After Father McKay was transferred, the Basilian Fathers, who had lately come to Rochester to teach at Aquinas Institute, began to assist on week-

ends and have continued up to the present day.

In June 1937, Bishop Kearney assigned Father Earl M. Tobin to be assistant pastor. Father Tobin labored very faithfully for the next four years and bridged the gap between Father Doran's administration and that of the present pastor, Father Robert Keleher.

The answer to Father Doran's hopes for recreation facilities came in the form of another portable building which the parish likewise purchased from the Board of Education for a small sum.

About this time the parish seemed to be recovering from the depression and growing again. In March, 1938, part of the property was sold to Monroe County for the purpose of widening Dewey Avenue into a boulevard. This, of course, meant progressive growth in the community and consequent help in liquidating the parish debt. But tragedy was not far off.

ON HOLY THURSDAY, April 14, 1938, Mass was offered in the morning followed by the procession of innocent youngsters to the Repository. Everything was in keeping with the traditional holiness of the day. Suddenly about supper time fire broke out in the school. In a very few moments the flames were beyond control and threatening the church.

The sad story can best be told from the report in the Catholic Courier:

"The fire which broke out in St. Charles Borromeo school on Holy Thursday afternoon blazed quickly and the smoke poured into the church. Father Doran fighting his way through the smoke rescued the Blessed Sacrament. The Sisters of Mercy ran to the school in an effort to salvage some books and supplies before the blaze became too great. Firemen from three volunteer Greece Companies and one from Rochester responded. The disastrous fire which completely ruined the school caused damage estimated at \$22,000."

The joy of Easter was shrouded in gloom that year for the pastor and parishioners of St. Charles. With his hopes dashed by tragedy, Father Doran found it very difficult to face the great task before him. But with the faith that encourages all in a task that is to God's honor and glory he proceeded resolutely ahead.

PLANS WERE made for the reconstruction and renovation of the church and school. When finished the total expense amounted to nearly \$25,000, most of which was realized through insurance payments. A house to

house collection for funds to reconstruct the school was also made in which people of all faiths were asked to contribute. Six thousand dollars was realized on this campaign.

At the beginning of the new year of 1939 the parish with its newly-constructed school and newly-decorated church seemed to be making steady if slow progress.

On June 17, 1939 Father Doran was transferred by Bishop Kearney from St. Charles to be pastor of St. Ann's Church in Palmyra. The Reverend Robert A. Keleher, assistant pastor at Corpus Christi Church, became the third pastor of St. Charles Borromeo parish.

Quietly the new pastor began to arrange for necessary improvements, especially in the landscaping of the grounds. Some small and necessary additions and repairs were made in the rectory. A new stoker was installed in the central boiler room of the combination school and church building. All in all, it was a very busy beginning for the new pastor.

During the next few years the work of small improvements continued. So, too, did the increase in the number of parishioners, particularly in the Sunday school section. It was soon necessary to add one more Mass to the Sunday schedule in the Church proper besides the Mass in All Souls' Chapel in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery. At this time, too, Father Tobin was transferred to Hornell, and Father Francis M. Feeney was assigned to his place.

The war years 1941-45 found St. Charles parish in good enough shape to weather the storm, spiritually, physically and financially. Mobilization for war called forth many young men and women from the parish, increased equipment in defense construction and armament and played havoc with home life in general.

ONE OF THE most remarkable feats of the parish, in a financial way, took place at this time. Due to the unbreakable combination of the parishioners' usual generosity and their pastor's skillful administration, the parish debt of slightly more than \$100,000 was entirely liquidated within a period of eight years. It was all the more remarkable when one considers that it was accomplished without the aid of any financial campaigns. Over and above that during 1944, it was necessary to remodel the portable hall for two classrooms at a cost of \$10,000. But on October 4, 1947 St. Charles Parish was debt free temporarily.

A special occasion of joy came in the spring of 1945, when the parish celebrated the Silver Jubilee of Father Keleher's ordination to the Priesthood. On Friday, May 25, the school children, well coached by the Sisters, gave a fine entertainment in honor of their pastor and presented him with a generous spiritual bouquet, listing 7,500 Masses heard, 2,000 Communion received, 4,500 Rosaries said, and 5,000 visits to the Blessed Sacrament. On the same occasion the parishioners, through Father Feeney, assistant pastor, presented a purse of \$1,500 to their beloved pastor.

Father Keleher celebrated his official Silver Jubilee Mass on Sunday, May 2 with Reverend Emmett Magee, late pastor of St. John's, Spencerport, as Deacon, and the Reverend Leo Smith, then Spiritual Director of St. Bernard's Seminary, at Subden-con.

THE YEAR OF 1946, following the end of war in August, 1945, found people beginning to take up the thread of normal living again. In the Diocese of Rochester Bishop Kearney launched a \$500,000 fund drive to build a new St. Andrew's Seminary. St. Charles' share was assessed at \$5,000. Responding most generously to the appeal of their Bishop, parishioners of St. Charles went "over the top" with a pledged amount of more than \$10,000.

Capitalizing on the vigour of a young and rapidly growing population St. Charles Parish made 1947 a year of achievement and ambitious dreams. The achievement, as noted previously, came on October 4, 1947, when the total debt on the church corporation was liquidated after twenty-two years of indebtedness. The long uphill battle had been marked by the payment of over \$100,000 in the last eight years of that period.

Within a month, Nov. 9, 1947, the young parish, under its efficient pastor, launched a campaign for funds for enlarged facilities. As Father Keleher put it, "This campaign has a double objective to provide a new St. Charles Borromeo Church, a new House of God and also new school facilities for our children."

THE DRIVE, conducted from Nov. 9 to Nov. 24 surpassed its goal with a pledged total of \$33,647 including pledges from 900 wage earners. With such a reserve fund St. Charles was now in a position to anticipate the need of a large church and greater school facilities.

Circumstances caused a change in plans. With the overwhelming growth of population in the Township of Greece, due to a rapidly expanded building program and a much increased post-war birth rate there was no alternative left but to use the reserve fund for the building of a new school, temporarily upsetting plans for a larger church.

Once the decision was made, plans were drawn up by architect, Edward M. Lorschneider and Donald M. Walzer, and ground was broken for the new school on December 9, 1949, paving the way for the construction work done by A. Friedrich & Son. In less than a year the cornerstone of the new addition was laid on September 10, 1950 and the school opened with a registration of 796 pupils.

THE DEDICATION and blessing of the new school addition took place on Sunday, December 1, 1950 after the 12:15 a.m. Mass with Bishop Kearney officiating. Assisting in the ceremony, which was attended by a large number of parishioners, were pastors from neighboring parishes, including Father Francis M. Feeney, formerly assistant pastor at St. Charles, and recently named pastor of the new St. James parish. Masters of ceremonies at the dedication were Father Keleher and Father John P. Lynch, who has succeeded Father Feeney as assistant pastor.

Meanwhile to keep pace with the record registration of children in the school and the increased faculty of Sisters (from 12 to 18 in one year) the convent had to be enlarged. In conjunction with the new school, plans were made for the construction of a large addition to the convent and the remodeling of the then existing building. The work began in April of 1950 and was marked, due to unforeseen difficulties, by many delays.

AS A RESULT, in September 1950 even though the new school was ready for occupancy, the Sisters were without a home. In the true spirit of religious, however, they rallied admirably to the occasion and overcame the inconveniences by "boarding out" at Holy Cross Convent, in a vacant class room in the old school, and in the portable building.

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Progress, Expansion Mark Fr. Keleher's Pastorate

The rapid expansion of St. Charles Borromeo Parish, which will mark its 25th anniversary Sunday, proved that what in recent years has been the Rev. Robert A. Keleher, pastor, was equal to it.

Kindly, zealous, and efficient administrator, Father Keleher, with the cooperation of his assistant and people, has made a shining contribution to his parish as well as to the diocese in his years of pastorate since June 17, 1939.

During his time of having charge of the faithful in the parish with headquarters at Dewey Ave. and Maiden Lane, the problems of war and of a growing population were presented for solution.

FATHER KELEHER managed to take care of the spiritual requirements of his people while not overlooking the material problems presented.

His most recent achievement was marked in December, 1949, when the Reverend Bishop Kearney came to bless the 15 classroom school, now one of the largest in the diocese. The school was realized after a successful parish campaign conducted under Father Keleher's supervision.

DEEPLY INTERESTED in the preparation of young men for the Holy Priesthood, Father Keleher lent his assistance to the diocesan-wide drive for St. Andrew's Seminary in 1946 and his parish responded with a pledged amount of more than \$10,000.

Father Keleher marked his silver jubilee of Ordination on May 27, 1945. The return in which he is held at St. Charles Borromeo was attended by presentation to him of a purse of \$1,500 by the Rev. Francis M. Feeney, assistant pastor. St. Charles went "over the top" with a pledged amount of more than \$10,000.

His school children told of their high regard through presentation of a spiritual bouquet listing 7,500 Masses, 2,000 Holy Communion, 4,500 Rosaries, and 5,000 Visits to the Blessed Sacrament.

In his pastoral record, Father Keleher can look with just pride on the fact that during an eight-year period ending on Oct. 4,

liquidated their own account was completed.

Further signs of the rapid growth of the parish in recent months has been the resignation of Father John P. Norris to be a second assistant pastor, the addition of another Mass on the Sunday schedule, bringing the total to six, and the increasing membership of the various parish organizations, such as the Holy Name Society, the Rosary Society, the Youth Club, the Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops.

The total cost of the building program at this time amounts to almost \$300,000, and once more the parishioners of St. Charles are faced with the work of reducing a large debt. Led by the well-organized efforts of the Holy Name and Rosary Societies, and deeply convinced of the importance of a Catholic education, these same parishioners have turned quietly and resolutely to the task. As inspiration, they have the example of twenty-five years of sacrifice by older parishioners.

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