

St. Mary's Genesee Centenary Speaker Recalls Early Church History In Livingston County

(Following is the text of the address delivered by Mr. Porter R. Chandler at the centennial banquet of St. Mary's Church in Genesee, N. Y., on Sunday, August 15, 1954. Mr. Chandler, president of the Catholic Lawyers Association of New York City, is the grandson of General Wadsworth, Genesee pioneer who donated land for first Catholic church in Genesee and loaned money for its construction.)

The place was the Jesuit Mission to the Seneca Indians. The priest was a French Jesuit from Canada named Father Jacques Fremin. He came to our neighborhood with a young colleague named Father Julian Garnier, who was then only 25 years old and who had the distinction of being the first Jesuit ordained in North America.

After a year Father Fremin was recalled and young Father Garnier was left in charge of the Mission. He started off, according to the records, with only three or four in his congregation, and continued his labors for many years under circumstances a good deal more trying than any of his successors.

I do not believe, for example, that Father Garnier (present pastor of St. Mary's) or any of his predecessors were ever attacked by a drunken parishioner with a tomahawk on the steps of his church. That is what happened to young Father Garnier nearly 300 years ago; and it was only the chance intervention of some more sober members of his flock that kept him from winning the crown of martyrdom that was gained by Father Jogues further east in our State.

FATHER GARNIER had other difficulties of perhaps a less serious nature. I am sure that his successor, the present Pastor of Lima (Rev. John M. Ball of St. Rose Church), has no difficulty in either spelling or pronouncing the name of his parish. Father Garnier's Parish was called Gachloragou; and in the records it is spelled some five or six different ways. He had out-missions at several places in the neighborhood with names even more unpronounceable.

The Senecas were not easy to convert and in some areas the missionaries were able to accomplish little or nothing. Father Garnier and his colleagues were able to record their feelings about the situation in a rather interesting way. As the first white men in this area, they undertook the duty of preparing the first maps of Western New York, which of course involved

giving names to the various localities.

There were two villages somewhere east of Lima—apparently in the neighborhood of Canandaigua and Geneva—where the missionaries were able to accomplish nothing with the Indians. They got their revenge by naming the villages on the map (a copy of which I have at home) as Soddom and Gomorrah and letting it go at that.

The Seneca Mission continued for about 20 years. We don't have the exact record as to when it stopped, but it was terminated in the course of one of the early Colonial wars between the French and English; and the dark night of paganism descended on this area for the next century.

When the Revolution came, the Catholics were a small and rather suspected minority, concentrated largely in Maryland. In many of the colonies they were under legal disabilities, and in all they were the object of suspicion in varying degrees. They nevertheless rallied to the cause of independence probably in greater numbers in proportion to population than any other sect of the community.

One of the factors which helped in breaking down distrust was the practical necessity among the colonists of keeping on good terms with the French Canadians of Quebec, whose support we sought, though unsuccessfully, in the struggle for independence.

IN THIS connection George Washington gave some very interesting and very farseeing instructions to the Colonial troops (nearly all Protestants) who engaged in the unsuccessful attack on Quebec in 1775. His letter is not very generally known and I should like to read a little of what he said:

"As far as it lies in your power, you are to protect and support the free exercise of the religion of the country, and the undisturbed enjoyment of the rights of conscience in religious matters with your utmost influence and authority."

"While we are contending for our own liberty, we should be very cautious not to violate the rights of conscience in others, ever considering that God alone is the Judge of the hearts of men, and to Him only in this case they are answerable."

"That is a statement which should serve as a guide to us and to our neighbors in our relations with each other. It is a statement that could be made from any pulpit; and it is well to remember that the author was George Washington."

Washington's friendship with Bishop Carroll was of course another important factor in breaking down such prejudices as then existed. Indeed, Washington sent a mission, which included Bishop Carroll (then a priest) and Benjamin Franklin to Canada in an attempt to win over the French Canadians to our cause.

IN ANY EVENT, after the Revolution religious disabilities were removed, and the way became clear for renewed Catholic activities. It was not, however, until 1808 that we had a Bishop in New York. His Diocese at first included the whole State. So far as the records indicate, the first priest in this area after the Revolution was sent by the Bishop of New York to be Pastor of Buffalo in 1821.

His parish included all of what is now the Diocese of Buffalo and most of what is now the Diocese of Rochester. Before his arrival Catholics from this area, if they wanted to receive the sacraments, had to make the

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long journey on horseback or by wagon to Albany; and it is of record that some of them did just that.

THE PASTOR of Buffalo was able to say Mass there only once a month. The rest of the time he was touring the remainder of his vast parish.

Apparently what first attracted the attention of the Church to our own neighborhood was the necessity of ministering to the spiritual needs of the laborers who came in to work on the Genesee Valley Canal, which followed the present line of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

A priest would come out from Buffalo whenever he could and go up and down the line of the Canal saying Mass in the construction huts of the workers or wherever else was available as a shelter.

IN 1847 THE Diocese of New York was split up and new dioceses were established at Albany and Buffalo. The Buffalo Diocese covered a third of the State. The first Bishop, Bishop Timon, when he was transferred here from Texas, found that he had 16 priests to cover this entire area, and the same number of churches, most of which were described in the records as "little better than huts."

Bishop Timon had other difficulties which I suspect sometimes made him wish he was back in Texas. When he arrived in Buffalo the trustees of the Church which he wanted to use as a cathedral would not let him in; and even placing the Church under an interdict did not make them change their minds. It was several years before this situation was adjusted, and in the meanwhile the Bishop had to build another Church that he could use as his own. It was under Bishop Timon, and as a part of the Diocese of Buffalo, that most of the early Churches in our County were established.

Our present Diocese of Rochester was not created until 1868. The oldest parish in the County, I believe, is St. Mary's in Danville, which was founded in 1845, before the creation of the Buffalo Diocese. The Churches in Lima and Livonia Center followed in 1848. Our own St. Mary's, and what was then the Our-Mission in Nunda, were founded in 1854.

The story of the early days of our own parish is set forth in the centennial booklet, and I shall not repeat it. For several years before this pastor, and the parents of some of the present members of this congregation would walk to Mt. Morris for Mass.

You all know the story of General Wadsworth's gift of the land on which the original

occurred to any of you to look around and see whether the sheriff or the State Troopers were taking our names in order to see that we lost our jobs and our ration cards. How many of our fellow Catholics behind the Iron Curtain would give their eyes-teeth for the privilege of being able to go to Church under as simple conditions as that?

When we got through with church, we probably went home and read the Sunday papers. Those papers contained whatever the editor wanted to print and we wanted to read, and not what the government wanted.

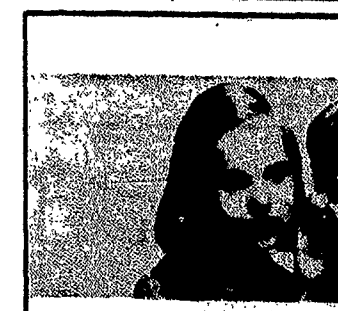
After that, we came here and enjoyed the privilege of having a very good turkey dinner, and the more dubious privilege of listening to a speaker who can talk for as long as he likes about whatever he likes without fear of the police. There are a million and a half of our fellow Catholics who disappeared behind the Iron Curtain in Indo China three weeks ago. How many of those, do you think, are able to enjoy such a dinner or to listen to any speaker?

THE LESSON which I think we should draw from all this is that we should be grateful to God every day of our lives for these very simple privileges that I have just enumerated.

Please bear in mind that it is not our own merits or our own superior intelligence or ability that has caused us to be born as residents of one of the most pleasant communities in the richest and freest nations on earth. It is entirely the Grace of God. Our souls are not worth two cents more in His sight than the souls of our persecuted fellow Catholics in Indo China. It is only through His Mercy that we are not in their places and they in ours.

All this imposes on us a great responsibility. We may not be called on to build a new St.

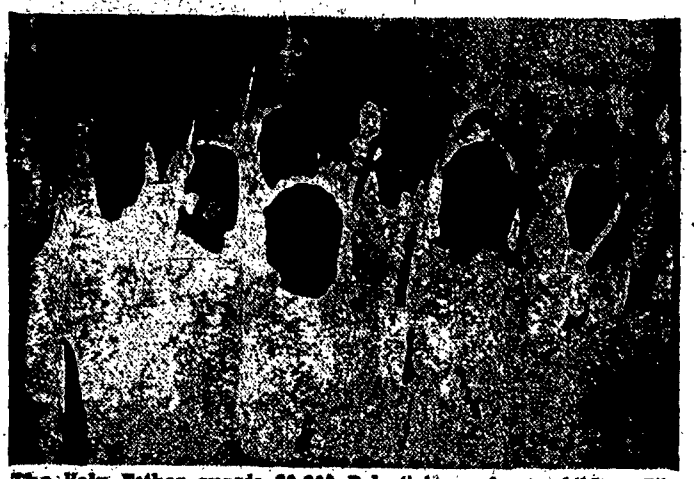
Mary's Church but we must go on building nevertheless. Our predecessors built only a foundation; and upon that foundation we must continue our work.



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Among the lovely writings of the early Church is the "Pilgrimage of Sylvia" to the Holy Land. We have Sylvia Salame, a novice with the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts at Biklavs, Lebanon. She will need \$150 for her year's training. Can you make this pious Sylvia your adopted daughter? Please try.

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