

# St. Francis Of Assisi Parish, Rochester, Started 25 Years Ago In Neighborhood Theater Building

Few Rochester parishes had a more humble beginning than St. Francis of Assisi which 25 years ago converted a former theater building in Whitney Street into a church that continues to serve as a house of worship for the parish to the present day.

In this Whitney Street church next Sunday (Oct. 10) at 11 a.m. Father Joseph Cirincione, pastor, will celebrate Mass marking the 25th anniversary of the parish's establishment. His Excellency Bishop Kearney will preside and preach the sermon.

History of the parish dates back to Aug. 15, 1929 when Bishop John Francis O'Hern solemnly blessed the new St. Francis of Assisi Church building which prior to its consecration, served not only as a theater but later as a garage.

The Rev. (later Monsignor) Adolph L. Gabbani was the first pastor of St. Francis. The lower flat of a house at 81 Whitney St., next door to the church, was rented from the Spoto family and used as the first rectory. A small cottage was purchased on June 29, 1930, and used as a meeting hall for parish societies. A garage was later built next to it.

**THE REV. REV. MSGR. JOHN M. DUFFY**, presently pastor of St. Augustine Church but then Diocesan Superintendent of Schools, used to hear confessions and celebrate Sunday Mass during those first years of the parish.

In the spring of 1931, Father Gabbani moved into his new rectory at 401 Orange St.

Sunday School was conducted in the church with students from St. Bernard Seminary instructing. During the week, several priests from the diocese would conduct catechism classes in the Charles Settlement House with the assistance of Miss Bertha Martens.

The number of children from public grammar schools catechized in those days averaged about 750. Public High School students were not released for classes at that time. When this began in 1941, the first class numbered 275 students.

**THE NUMBER** of grammar school students under instruction today has dropped to approximately 500, with about 220 high school students enrolled. The parish now has about 125 children enrolled in parochial schools and about 30 in Catholic high schools.

**SUNDAY COLLECTIONS** during those days of depression averaged about \$65 a week. The low point was reached in 1933 when the average was \$54.

Baptisms also reached a low point that year with only 84 babies baptized. High year for Baptisms was 1948 when there were 154. Last year there were 163 Baptisms in the parish.

Confirmations were high during these early years. There were 152 Confirmations in 1934 with the high point reached in 1937 when there were 163.

**THE NUMBER** of marriages in the early years of the parish were about the same as they are now: about 35 to 45 a year. In 1941 the number rose to 73 and the two years following the war recorded a total of 163 marriages. The death rate has remained fairly constant, averaging between 30 to 40 deaths a year. The number of Communions rose from 17,000 in the first years to 35,000 during the war years. Highest recorded attendance at Sunday Mass was on April 16, 1939, when 2,236 persons attended St. Francis Church.

In the spring of 1933, Bishop O'Hern died and was succeeded by Archbishop Mooney who became Archbishop-Bishop of Rochester.

The Rev. Joseph A. Cirincione, one of the newly ordained priests of the St. Bernard Seminary Class of 1934 was appointed the first full time assistant of St. Francis on July 1, 1934.

The following May, the Rev. Pietro Moia, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Church in Auburn, died and Father Gabbani was appointed pastor of that parish. Archbishop Mooney appointed Father Cirincione as administrator of the Rochester Church. These changes took place on June 1, 1935.

One month later, the Rev. Thomas J. Manley, a newly ordained priest, was assigned to St. Francis as assistant pastor. Father Manley was given charge of the Sodality.

To supplement the meagre income of the parish, various card parties, raffles, bazaars, suppers and dances used to be held. In spite of this, it was necessary to borrow \$350 to pay for a furnace in the rectory and for painting the interior of the church.

St. Francis of Assisi was established as an "Italian National Parish" in 1935, having hitherto been a mission directly under the bishop. Parish lines went along the New York Central Railroad (Main Line) to the intersection of Brown St. to the middle of Allen St., to the Subway, along the Subway to the N.Y.C.R.R. south and west of Lyell Ave. to the city line and along the city line on the west.

A summer school was conducted in 1936 with the assistance of Sisters Carita and Maria Stella of SS. Peter and Paul Church. Classes were held in the club house and in the rectory garden. Father Manley was succeeded as assistant pastor by the Rev. John M. Merklinger in June of 1937. The same year, on the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, the outdoor statue of St. Francis was solemnly blessed. A double house was purchased at 71 Whitney St. on Sept. 23, 1937, to be used as a rectory.

On November 11, 1937, His Excellency Bishop James E. Kearney was installed as the fifth Bishop of the Rochester See to succeed Archbishop Mooney who earlier had been named to head the Archdiocese of Detroit.

**SHORTLY AFTER** Bishop Kearney's arrival in Rochester, Father Cirincione was appointed pastor of St. Francis and he was installed in office by the Rt. Rev. Msgr. William M. Hart, V.G., on the vigil of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Dec. 7, 1937. On Feb. 14, 1938, the parish was incorporated under the title of St. Francis of Assisi Church of Rochester, N. Y.

Catechism classes were transferred from the Charles Settlement House to the clubhouse and to the church in the fall of 1938. The need for a catechetical center was now greater than ever. Plans were launched for the construction of a parish Boys' Center, and in the spring of 1940, a site was purchased at 69-71 Whitney St. Bishop Kearney met with a special committee of businessmen headed by Charles M. Dispensa and the late Christopher H. D'Amato to map plans for citywide support of the new center.



St. Francis of Assisi Church, Whitney St., Rochester.



FATHER CIRINCIONE  
Pastor

Parishioners were already contributing to the fund for the center. It was hoped to build the center entirely from donated labor to help keep expenses down. On Sunday, June 9, ground breaking ceremonies were held with the Rev. John Duffy and Judge Charles Lambase as principal speakers. Excavation started the next day. Work continued all summer and advanced sufficiently by fall to have the cornerstone ceremony on Sunday, Oct. 6. Monsignor Hart officiated at the ceremony and the principal speaker was City Judge Michael Rogers.

**NINE MONTHS AFTER** the groundbreaking ceremony, on Sunday, March 9, 1941, Bishop Kearney blessed the new building and celebrated Mass there. More than 450 persons assembled in the auditorium in the evening when the dedication dinner was held. The late Father Flanagan (Msgr. Edward A. Flanagan) director of Boys Town, was principal speaker.

The final cost of the building, including equipment, was \$19,500. The new Boys' Center contained, in addition to catechetical rooms, a large recreation room in the basement and a large auditorium with stage on the main floor. This was suitable for basketball and other games.

A BUS WAS donated to the parish in 1941 by C. P. Ward enabling Father Cirincione to carry out his program for the young people of the parish. A cottage was purchased at Conesus Lake and it became a familiar sight to see the St. Francis of Assisi bus, filled with youngsters, headed for Conesus Lake.

Father Merklinger was succeeded as assistant pastor by the Rev. Thomas K. Cleary in June of 1942. This year also, the house at 71 Whitney St. was converted into a rectory. The war years created a shortage of priests in the diocese and St. Francis was

left without an assistant from 1944 to 1946.

A campaign was begun in the summer of 1944 to raise money for a new church organ. The campaign was successful, but due to shortage of materials, delivery was delayed until 1947. The organ was blessed on Sunday, March 9, 1947, anniversary of the opening of the Boys' Center, by Bishop Kearney before Mass. Philip Kreckel played an organ recital that afternoon.

ON MARCH 4, 1948, a double house was purchased at 81 Whitney St. It was hoped to use it some day as a convent but in the meantime it was rented to two families. The house at 401 Orange St. was vacated by its tenants in 1945 and with funds furnished by the Hickey-Freeman Clothing Co., it was converted into a Girls' Center. Bishop Kearney blessed it on Sunday, January 26, 1946.

The Rev. Francis H. Vogt was welcomed by the parish on Sunday, May 12, 1948 as its new assistant. Father Vogt had been serving as an army chaplain in Europe.

The Holy Name Society, which had discontinued meetings during the war, was revived and became active again. Shortly after ordination, the Rev. Anthony J. Calmeri reported to St. Francis as a second assistant July 1, 1947.

The first of a series of Novenas in honor of Our Lady of Fatima for the Conversion of Russia and World Peace was begun on Sunday, January 11, 1948. That evening, Father Cirincione began a series of weekly radio talks on the story of Fatima over WSAY.

The Women's Eucharistic League held its first Holy Hour on March 27, 1948. Attendance then was about 75 women, but the organization now numbers about 85 women.

**FATHER CIRINCIONE** left for a pilgrimage to Fatima and Rome on May 7, 1948. Before leaving the mass of the parish launched plans for a shrine dedicated to Our Lady in the lot between the church and the Girls' Center. Father Cirincione returned at the end of May with a statue of Our Lady of the Rosary of Fatima, carved out of wood by the famous Portuguese sculptor, Jose Thedim, and blessed by Pope Pius XII. It was solemnly placed in the waiting shrine.

A chapter of the Third Order of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel was established in the parish.

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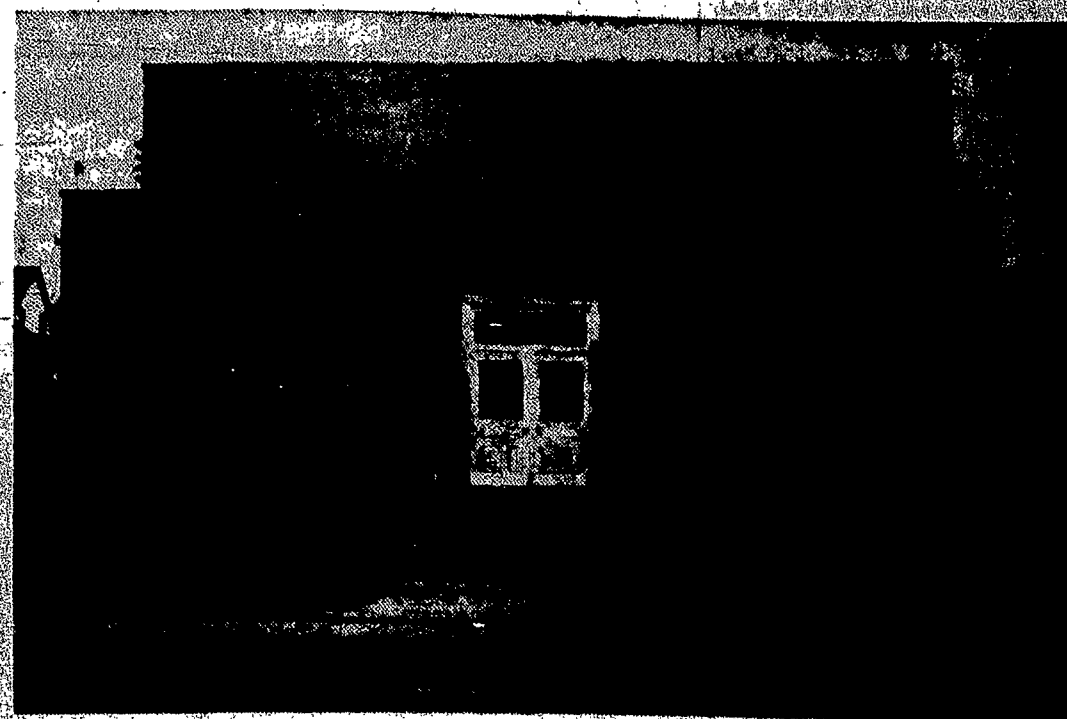
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