

The 'French Church' Building Now 100

By FATHER ROBERT McNAMARA

Another of the monthly articles commemorating the history of the Rochester Diocese, written especially for the centennial year by the author of THE DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER, 1868-1968.

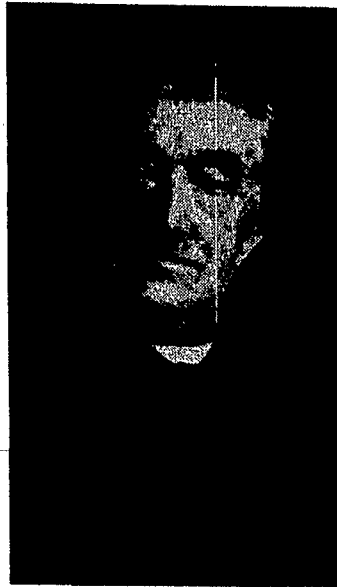
The year 1968, which marks the 100th birthday of the diocese of Rochester, also marks the 100th anniversary of the downtown church building so well known to Rochesterians as "the French Church."

This little parish of Our Lady of Victory has had an interesting history. The year 1968 is obviously a good time to review that story a little more fully than has been done before.

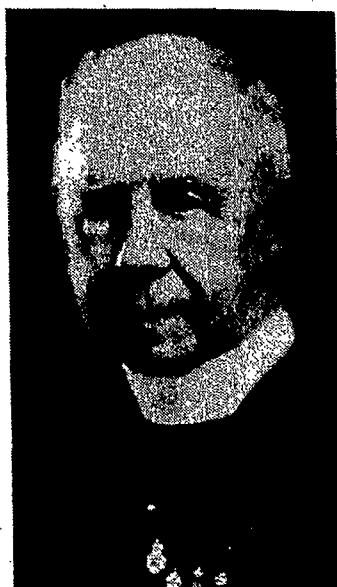
In 1841, after he had made a visit to Rochester (which was then in his diocese) Bishop John Hughes of New York wrote: "The large and increasing number of Canadians and French Catholics and its neighborhood encourage them to solicit the presence of a clergyman who could speak to them in their own language."

There was, indeed, a growing number of French-Canadians and French in Rochester. Some of the names of the earliest members of the colony were: Pierre and Joseph Savard, Charles Lamoureux, Edouard Gravel, Joseph Forest, Antoine Langie, J. Lavigne, Israel LeBeau, Severe Gendreau, and Ambrose Dupont.

It was the Redemptorists of St. Joseph's Church who, a few years after Bishop



FR. HIPPOLYTE DEREGGE



FR. A. A. NOTEBAERT

Hughes' visit, took the first steps to organize the French congregation. Father Simon Saenderl, C.S.S.R., gathered the French together in or before 1848. He said Mass for them in a hall in the Osborn Hotel. This did not work out very well, however. The hotel hall was a place where many parties and dances were held, and it was hard to make it devotional. Later in 1849, however, the original St. Joseph's Church on Ely Street, which after the opening of the present St. Joseph's Church in 1846 had continued to be used for the parish school, was emptied by the transfer of the school. So the Redemptorist Fathers made this church building available to the French colony. They occupied it for 20 years.

The maintenance of this

special mission presented several problems. Bishop Timon wanted to make it an independent parish, and actually did appoint a resident pastor as early as 1852—a Father A. Saunier. It proved difficult to obtain and keep capable pastors and for that reason, during most of the period 1848-1862 the care of the French Church was in the hands of the Redemptorists.

In the matter of unqualified pastors, the best illustration was Father Matricon. He was a French nobleman, the Count de Fontenine; and of course he spoke French well—in fact, eloquently. But a short time after his arrival, while at dinner with Bishop Timon and a group of the Rochester clergy, he launched into a strong defense of French Freemasonry! Some days

later, Bishop Timon relieved him of his assignment.

It was stated in 1870 that the little parish had had 14 pastors in 14 months. This was not a matter worth boasting about. The only thing the little church could boast about, in those days was that in 1855 it became, apparently the first building in Rochester to be illuminated by gas lighting.

A new era dawned in 1863 when a young Belgian priest, Father Hippolyte de Regge, was installed as pastor. Realizing the poverty of his some 200 families, Father Hippolyte, living without a rectory, eating in a workman's restaurant, scraping, skimping, economizing, as he got acquainted with his people, gradually laid the foundations of a sounder parochial life. Five years after his installation, he had even completed a new parish church on Pleasant Street—the present structure. The original church had been called "St. Mary's French Church." The new building was called "Our Lady of Victories."

When Bishop McQuaid became bishop of Rochester in 1868, this was the first church in the new diocese that he dedicated.

Father DeRegge handed over the pastorate to Father Joseph Dole in 1869. Father Dole opened a parish school in 1871—48 children taught by a laywoman. Father Dole transferred in 1871, and Father De Regge, now the Chancellor of the Diocese, resumed the pastorate until 1879.

In 1879 another Belgian

priest arrived to take over the pastorate: Father Alphonse Notebaert (1847-1928). It was he in particular who induced Flemish immigrants to settle in and around Rochester. By 1912, there were 800 Belgians here. Eventually the Belgians far outnumbered the French. In addition to operating the parish well, he was active throughout the East in missionary work among Flemish and Holland immigrants. For this work he subsequently was rewarded by the King of Belgium with the Belgian Legion of Honor (1912). And in 1921 he was made an honorary canon of the Cathedral of Bruges, Belgium.

The opening of a three-room schoolhouse in 1885, achieved after much effort, was a votive offering of Father Notebaert. Having suffered a breakdown in 1888, he went to Lourdes (he had already installed a Lourdes Grotto of Victory in 1883), and promised Our Lady that if he was cured, he would build a school dedicated to her under that title. He recovered, and built the little school. The Sisters of St. Joseph taught there from 1885 until 1947, when the school was forced to close.

Father Notebaert died of heart failure on March 29, 1928, as he was preparing to offer Mass. He was succeeded by Father Canalle A. Van der Meulen, S.S.C.C. "Father Van," a missionary of the Sacred Heart Fathers, came to Rochester in 1913 and used this place as a center for his missionary trips. Then he became assistant to Father Notebaert. Finally, he was

named to succeed him. From that time on to 1968, the parish was in the care of priests of this religious order. "Father Van" celebrated the 90th anniversary of the parish in 1938, and on that occasion he was honored by Leopold III of Belgium with the royal medal of the Order of the Crown of Belgium. That same year, Father Van der Meulen retired, spending his last years in Belgium, where he died on Dec. 19, 1955.

Father Stephen Courturiaux was named to succeed "Father Van." He had been active prior to that in spreading the devotion of the Home Enthronement of the Sacred Heart. In 1952, Father Edward Callens was named pastor. Also a native Belgian, he had served as a World War II chaplain with the U.S. forces.

An interesting development occurred under Father Callens in 1953, when Our Lady of Victory was designated the official center of the Daily Mass League, which had been founded in 1951. This is an organization formed through the initiative of Rochester laymen. It has developed since then into an international apostolate.

Father Joachim Shults, C.S.S.C.C., named pastor in 1968, was the last of the Sacred Heart Fathers to hold that post. The condition of the parish had meanwhile greatly changed. Few of the old French and Flemish people attended any more, and the "French Church" was pretty much a downtown "lunch-hour" church. There



Our Lady of Victory

was considerable talk in 1967 about the sale of the property. It was a report that brought forth widespread complaints from Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

The church was not sold. In June 1968, Bishop Sheen named as its co-pastors two diocesan priests, both officials of the Pastoral office: Fathers Joseph W. Dailey and William M. Hart. Our

Lady of Victories Church was thus able to live out the 100th year of its structural existence.

Who knows whether, with the Genesee Crossroads development so close, the "French Church" may not now be entering upon a new phase of its career as a "downtown church"?

It is certainly located "where the people are."

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First Blessings from Newly Ordained

Auxiliary Bishop Dennis W. Hickey kneels to receive first blessings from three Basilian priests he ordained Dec. 14 prior to concelebrated Mass in Sacred Heart Cathedral. It was the first time Bishop Hickey imparted the Sacrament of Holy Orders. The ordinandi are (from left) Father Donald Hyatt, CSB, imparting blessing; Father Donald G. Schwenzer, CSB, and Father Michael J. Wesley, CSB.



Retreat League President

Joseph Mercer (right) of Our Lady of Mercy Parish, Irondequoit, new president of Rochester Diocesan Laymen's Retreat League, receives Madonna plaque, symbolic of that office, from retiring president William E. Kramer.

Father Dettleff Gets

Baptized in a Hurry

Owego, N.Y.—Father Jack Dettleff, assistant pastor of St. Patrick's Church, Owego, was baptized Friday morning at 6:03 a.m.

The baptism was not of the usual sort. Father Dettleff who serves as chaplain to the Owego Fire Department and Emergency squad, assisted in his first maternity case. It was reported: "Mother, son and Father Jack came through it just fine."

Father Dettleff arrived at the scene of the emergency before the Squad ambulance arrived. When the people with prior experience finally came, Father Dettleff became an attendant and did a fine job.

The delivery was perfect, with no complications and the baby was holding his head off even before the delivery was complete.

After the mother and son were removed to the local hospital, Father Dettleff and crew bought themselves a round of cigars.

Bishop to Offer Mass

At State Hospital

Bishop Fulton J. Sheen will offer the annual "Christmas Mass" for staff members and patients of Rochester State Hospital in its auditorium, 1600 South Ave., at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Dec. 20.

Father James L. Callan, hospital chaplain, recalled that a similar Mass offered by Bishop Sheen two years ago was the first invitation he had received from an institutional group within the Diocese, and the first he accepted.

NCCJ Hears Bishop Sheen

New York (RNS)—Bishop Fulton J. Sheen told a meeting of the National Conference of Christians and Jews here that the only thing that can unite men is God described in terms of men.

The God who belongs equally to a strong man of faith like Abraham, an "indifferent" man like Isaac and a "conceiver" like Jacob "is what unites us more than anything else in the world," the Roman Catholic prelate declared.

Bishop Sheen was the principal speaker at a luncheon at which the NCCJ National Brotherhood Award was presented to Gerson Reichman, head of the Lampport Co., a textile firm.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob symbolize all of humanity, Bishop Sheen

said, and the Bible describes God in terms of these men. The Christian, the bishop stated, followed the Greek mode of finding God through works of nature.

"The Jew did not go to God through history. He went to God through history. The Jew in his long religious history never proved God. He just found him. Where you find Him in history you find Him described . . . in terms of men. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

"When we talk about brotherhood . . . maybe we just cannot get together of and by ourselves. We have to get together from the outside . . . That which unites all Jews and all Christians is this common nature of God who is the God of man," Bishop Sheen declared.



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