

# Immaculate Conception: New at 125

By MOLLY JUDGE

Despite the fact that the church needs major repair work and is too large for the small congregation to meet its operating expenses

And that the school must share grade responsibilities with St. Lucy's

And even despite the fact that Urban Renewal is ripping up neighborhood roots, Immaculate Conception remains one of the most vital parishes in the diocese as it celebrates its 125th anniversary.

Immaculate has changed since its foundation in 1848. The congregation was mainly Irish immigrant but the membership rapidly expanded until it reached its maximum of 4,000 middle and upper-class parishioners early in the century.

Years later came the rush to the suburbs and Urban Renewal. Many of the old parishioners return on Sundays but 40 per cent of the congregation of 400 are inner city blacks.

According to Father Paul Brennan, pastor of Immaculate, the main problem is integration. "We have two cultures here. Basically we have the same struggles as other parishes but at times it's difficult for the cultures to blend smoothly. I hope in the future we can achieve a spiritual integration, so that the blacks and whites will be brothers and sisters in Christ," he said.

Nevertheless, the Third Ward parish on Plymouth Avenue possesses a vitality that draws old parishioners back and makes the non-Catholics of the neighborhood aware of its presence. Father Brennan attributes this phenomenon to the liturgy (which depends on the congregation's participation) and to the social issues that the church takes definite stands on.

The parish council has become the heart of the parish. It stresses awareness of world problems and invites controversial speakers to explain their positions during the Mass and afterward in an informal question and answer period.

Cesar Chavez urged parishioners to boycott grapes, lettuce and Gallo wines to aid the United Farm Workers in their fight to choose their own union. Representatives from the Indian community trying to reclaim land in the Adirondacks, elaborated on their claims.

A group of citizens dramatized the plight of the Attica defendants and raised \$1,300 toward the hiring of defense lawyers. Church members also took a positive stand on the ordination of women.

"A member of the parish council was concerned about anti-racism in the Vietnam war," said Father Robert Kreckel, former pastor. "A resolution was adopted by the council and Immaculate became the first parish in the diocese to offer symbolic sanctuary for those who had reservations against entering the service on religious or moral grounds."

As a result of the resolution, Immaculate refused to pay the federal excise tax on the rectory telephone. According to Father Kreckel, the refusal was to demonstrate that citizens were supporting the war through the Internal Revenue Service though they were not actively aware of it.

The parish also was in the forefront of the move toward an ecumenical ministry. "In order to serve the total community not just the parishioners, we decided to form an ecumenical ministry along with the other churches in the area," Father Kreckel said.

Father Kreckel contacted Larry Coppard, a Protestant seminarian who was familiar with the neighborhood, to serve as the community minister. Another first for Immaculate came when Coppard was ordained a Presbyterian minister in a community celebration at the church in 1967.

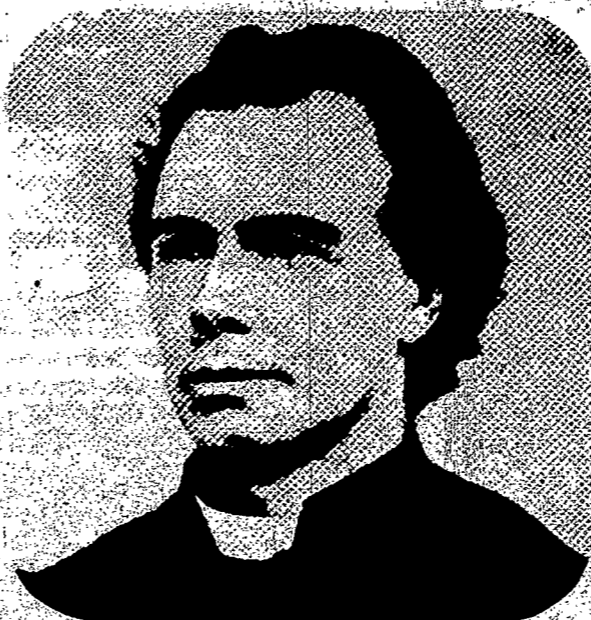
In spite of its versatility, the church is feeling the pains of inflation.

"The parish council is currently trying to decide whether the church should be torn down or if it should be repaired," said Father Brennan. "If the church is torn down, we'll use the church hall as a place of worship. Still it may be more profitable to make repairs."

At present, the church which has a capacity of 800, is financially drained. In an effort to lessen the burden, the back of the church has been roped off and the convent has been sold. A house on Edinburgh Street has been converted into a rectory since the nuns now occupy the former rectory.



The convent, school and church of Immaculate Conception



FATHER JOHN FITZPATRICK  
First Pastor



FATHER PAUL BRENNAN  
Present Pastor

"But it's not the buildings that make up a parish, it's the people. Even if we move into the school for Mass, the parish will still be the same," said Father Brennan.

Immaculate is much more than a church building. It is a tradition, a history and a people. It began when Bishop Timon of Buffalo sent an urgent appeal to Bishop Canfield of Kildare, Ireland, explaining the scarcity of priests in the United States.

Father John Fitzpatrick was a seminarian at Carlow College in Ireland when he heard of Bishop Timon's appeal.

When Bishop Timon ordained Father Fitzpatrick on Oct. 15, 1848, he felt the young Irishman would make an ideal pastor of the church he was planning to build for the Irish families that settled in the southwest section of Rochester.

In April 1849, Father Fitzpatrick and his fellow Irishmen built a small brick church facing Edinburgh Street and christened it the Immaculate Conception. Construction and land cost \$4,500.

"Obstacles confronted them on every side. The Catholics living here were few in numbers and they were blessed with only a little of this world's goods; their incomes were small, scarcely enough to support their families, yet their faith prompted them to make generous contributions for God's cause," said Father Augustine M. O'Neil, the 10th pastor of the parish.

Father Fitzpatrick was sent to organize other parishes in the area in 1852. The next eight years saw a number of pastors, Father Patrick Bradley (1852), Father Thomas O'Brien (1852-1858), Father Francis McKeon (1858-1859) and Father W. C. Stevens (1859-1860).

The former vicar general of the Buffalo Diocese, Father Peter Bede, was appointed pastor in 1860. It was during Father Bede's term that the church was destroyed by fire. The Civil War pastor built a new church facing Plymouth Avenue in 1864 for the sum of \$35,000.

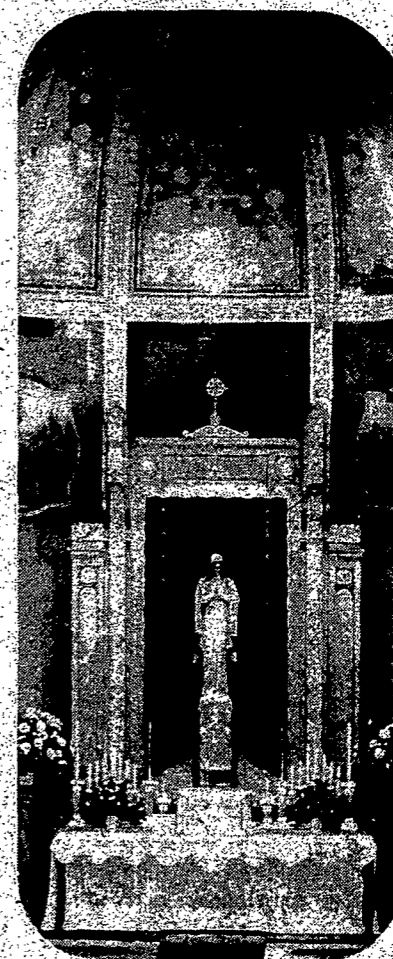
In 1866, Father Bede was succeeded by Father Patricio Byrnes, a native of Montevideo, Uruguay. Two years later, Immaculate Conception was one of the largest and most important parishes in the newly formed Rochester Diocese.

It was Father Byrnes' goal of bringing Catholic education to his parishioners that was responsible for the first parish school in 1871. The school, which cost \$15,000, was geared toward the secular as well as the religious education. Father Byrnes also built a rectory.

The parish fell into \$44,000 debt after the church was repaired as the result of fire damage. After nine years of service, Father Byrnes died on Good Friday 1875.

Father Michael Meagher, the next pastor, had as his main task the job of making the parish solvent. The Irishman from Tipperary reduced the debt to \$19,000 by holding fairs, forming a church debt society and by conducting an annual subscription drive for the weekly collections.

Bishop McQuaid appointed Father James F. O'Hare to serve as Immaculate's pastor in 1886. During the next 12



then



and now

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