

# Bishop Kearney . . . A Fond Memoir

By FATHER ROBERT F. McNAMARA

Bishop Kearney is dead; and the whole diocese mourns at his passing.

James Edward Kearney, who served from 1937 to 1966 as fifth bishop of Rochester, was called to his reward at 6:05 a.m. on Jan. 12, 1977. He left behind him a record of solid achievement, and the personal memory of a handsome man with an Irish wit, kind, generous and always the gentleman; a capable and devoted churchman; and a citizen who quickly won and easily kept the esteem of his own people and his fellow-citizens of all beliefs.

Bishop Kearney was 92 years old at the time of his death. He was born on October 28, 1884, at Red Oak, Iowa. But the only trace of his Iowa sojourn was a midwestern intonation. His parents, William Patrick and Rosina O'Doherty Kearney, who had come from Ireland to Red Oak, moved east to New York City in 1886. Manhattan remained their residence ever after, except for the year 1892-1893, which the family spent in County Donegal, Ireland. James thus grew up a proper New Yorker. "There is no plot of earth," he used to say, "like that between 42nd and 58th Streets." Only around 1969 did he discontinue his frequent trips to Gotham.

James Edward received his elementary and secondary education in the public schools of Manhattan. At the end of high school, he felt called to the priesthood. His parents had no objection, but his mother, whose counsel he greatly relied on, advised caution. It would be better, she thought, for him to prepare for some secular profession first. Then, if it turned out that the seminary was not for him, he could step at once into that lay career. James therefore attended the New York Training School for Teachers. Its two-year course gave him a rather wide experience as a practice teacher in the New York Public School system. At the end of the course he acquired both the city and the state licenses to teach.

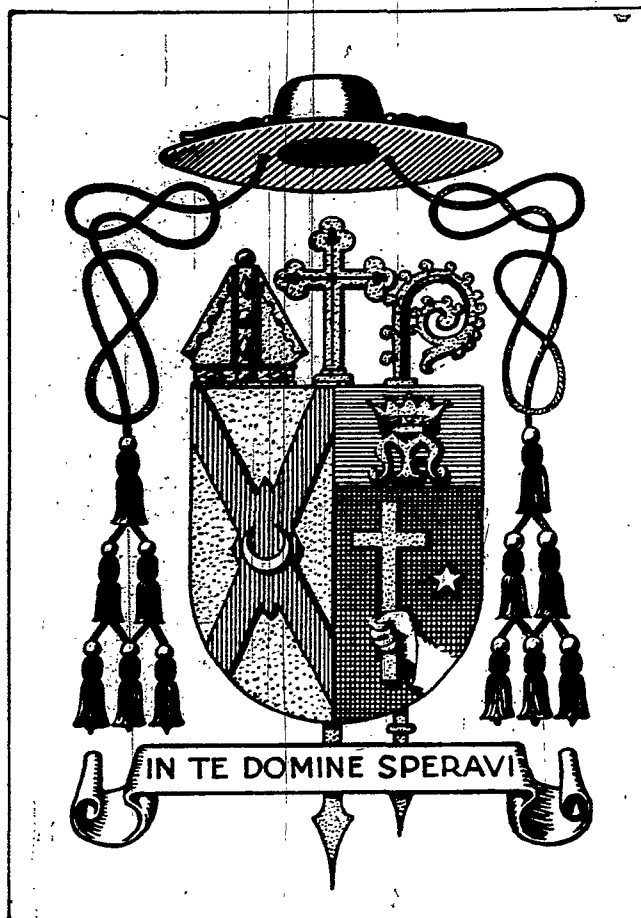
Two years at the Training School had not dissuaded the young New Yorker from his desire to study for the priesthood. In the fall of 1903, he enrolled at St. Joseph's Seminary, Dunwoodie (Yonkers), as a candidate for orders in the Archdiocese of New York. Because of his high qualifications, he was ordained in advance of his class. The ordination was conferred by the auxiliary bishop of New York, the saintly Thomas Francis Cusack (later bishop of Albany), on Sept. 19, 1908. Young Father Kearney was then sent at once to the Catholic University of America to finish the last year of his theological course. Later on, as bishop, he would serve with pleasure as a member of the board of trustees of this, his Washington Alma Mater.

Returning to Manhattan in 1909, Father Kearney was appointed assistant pastor of St. Cecilia's Church. This appointment lasted until 1928; and it was here that he developed his pastoral skills. In 1928 he was named founder of a new parish in the Bronx, St. Francis Xavier. His four years there were happy ones; and when he became a bishop he incorporated in his episcopal coat of arms the surpliced, cross-bearing arm of the missionary patron saint of the Bronx parish. While at St. Francis Xavier's he also found time to teach courses in religion at Good Counsel College, White Plains. In 1931 he was appointed superintendent of Catholic schools in Bronx County, a part-time position. Father Kearney's early priestly career was therefore strong in parochial and educational emphasis.

Obviously, the talents of the pastor-educator of St. Francis Xavier Church were not unknown to the archdiocesan authorities. On July 1, 1932, Pope Pius XI recognized his abilities in a striking way by naming him bishop of a see far removed from the "sidewalks of New York"—Salt Lake City, Utah. Cardinal Patrick J. Hayes, archbishop of New York, assisted by Archbishop John J. Mitty of San Francisco and Auxiliary Bishop John J. Dunn



Rosina Kearney and her son James Edward on his christening day, 1884.



Bishop Kearney's seal.

of New York, consecrated the fourth bishop of Salt Lake City at St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York, on Oct. 28, 1932—the Bishop-elect's 48th birthday. Since Cardinal Hayes could trace the origin of his own episcopal orders back to Archbishop John Carroll, the first American bishop, Bishop Kearney became another link in the chain of bishops established by the founder of the Church in the United States. Formal installation of the new bishop took place in the Salt Lake City Cathedral of the Madeleine on Nov. 24, 1932.

As head of the Diocese of Salt Lake City, James E. Kearney presided over an area that was statewide in dimensions but had only 10,000 Catholics. Diocesan income, small even in a prosperous season, was still further reduced in the early 1930s as a result of the Great Depression. So Bishop Kearney had to become an apostolic beggar, turning for assistance to benefactors in New York City. Nevertheless, he was able during his five Salt Lake City years to open two new parishes, add to the number of his clergy, and pay off the debt of the Cathedral of the Madeleine. Another problem that faced the Bishop was the preponderance throughout Utah of the Church of the Latter Day Saints. But Bishop Kearney, a friendly man, succeeded in establishing a good rapport with these Mormon fellow citizens. His Catholic flock held him in high and lasting esteem. The Utah priests remembered him with particular gratitude. Every Christmas he sent to each of them a personal greeting and a generous check. As late as Aug. 9, 1976, the present bishop of Salt Lake City, Most Rev. Joseph L. Federal, paid a personal visit to his predecessor at St. Ann's Home to invite him to participate in the bicentennial of Fra Silvestre Escalante's pioneer expedition into Utah.

On July 31, 1937, Pope Pius XI transferred Bishop Kearney to the Diocese of Rochester, to succeed Archbishop Edward Mooney, promoted to Detroit. James Kearney thus became the second New Yorker to head the Rochester see. The first had been the diocesan founder, Bishop Bernard J. McQuaid (1823-1909). There was still another link between the first and the fifth bishops. When he was an altar boy at St. Agnes' Church in Manhattan, Jimmy Kearney had served the Mass of Bishop McQuaid on the occasion of the latter's visit to New York. The new bishop's installation took place on Nov. 11, 1937. He was the first Rochester bishop to be enthroned in Sacred Heart Pro-Cathedral, for the city's original cathedral, St. Patrick's, had been sold and demolished earlier that year. But he was also the last Rochester bishop to be welcomed at the magnificent old Central Railroad Station. As the new bishop of Rochester arrived in the evening of Nov. 10, dressed in the Prince Albert coat which he long continued to wear at civic functions, he was greeted by 12,000 members of his new flock—2,000 more than the whole Catholic population of Utah.

The fifth head of the Rochester Catholic diocese quickly made friends not only with the Catholics of his diocesan area but with Rochester civic leaders. As early as Oct. 10, 1938, in a year of economic recession, Bishop Kearney proposed to the Rochester community a campaign of "going out and buying" as a method of stimulating business recovery. His proposal was widely commended. He also encouraged the launching of a "Catholic Labor College" to train working men in social ethics and parliamentary procedure, so as to enable them to participate constructively in union activities at a time when leftists were trying to manipulate trade unions.

One important undertaking early in the Kearney regime was the amalgamation into one institution, St. Joseph's Villa, of the three hitherto independent Rochester Catholic orphanages. The new Bishop also gave to Nazareth College the permission which his predecessor had denied, to build a new campus in Pittsford. Nazareth moved from its Augustine Street site to the new location in 1941-1942. But the construction of St. Joseph's Villa and the new Nazareth campus could be carried out in those years of transition between depression time and wartime only because they

enjoyed a welfare and educational priority. Other large-scale diocesan construction had to wait until the close of World War II.

James E. Kearney showed himself a vigorous patriot in the second World War, following the traditional pattern of American Catholic wartime loyalty. He took a special interest in providing chaplains for the armed forces from the ranks of his diocesan priests. He paid careful attention to the great Samson Naval Base, which sprang up almost overnight on the farm lands high above Seneca Lake. The base became accustomed to his visits to administer Confirmation and take part in solemn religious functions. The most notable Mass he celebrated at Samson was that of July 4, 1944. His congregation that day consisted of 16,000 naval recruits, and was said to be the largest religious gathering in the history of the United States Navy. After the war ended in 1945, the Bishop did much to aid the victims of war in many nations, and encouraged the admission into his diocese of a large number of displaced persons.

Victory in the Pacific put a period to the long moratorium on new construction. Bishop Kearney became thereafter (as it turned out) the last builder-bishop of the Rochester Diocese. He founded many new parishes (during his regime the number of churches with resident pastors rose from 129 to 156). Many older parishes also built new buildings, increasingly modern in design and magnificent in proportions. Sacred Heart Church, designated as official cathedral of the diocese in 1952, received a renovated sanctuary in 1957 and solemn consecration in 1961.

One ceremony that gave Bishop Kearney special pleasure was dedicating new churches, "tabernacles to God." His second great delight was blessing new schools or school buildings. In 1937, the year of his arrival, the diocese had 72 parochial grammar schools. By 1966 the number had risen to 99. After the war, the Bishop also directed his attention to increasing the number of the diocesan high schools. In metropolitan Rochester he set up McQuaid Jesuit High School, Cardinal Mooney High School and Bishop Kearney High School. Mercy High enlarged its facilities, and St. Agnes High moved into a new building. In Geneva, DeSales High acquired a new plant. Mount Carmel High, in Auburn, and Notre Dame High in Elmira also moved from older locations into newly constructed school houses. For St. Andrew's Seminary, long located in downtown Rochester, the Bishop provided a new home on Buffalo Road. And towards the end of his regime, he saw the foundation of Becket Hall on the St. John Fisher campus: a residence for college-level diocesan seminarians attending Fisher.

St. John Fisher College was probably the Bishop's greatest achievement. Operated by the Basilian Fathers, it opened its Fairport Road campus in 1951. Both Fisher and nearby Nazareth expanded rapidly during the 1950s and 1960s, and in 1961 they worked out a plan for joint academic cooperation.

Towards the end of his regime, Bishop Kearney was asked what he thought was the most significant accomplishment of his episcopate. He replied that, in his belief, it was the diocesan achievements in education. The reply was that of an experienced educator, and few would disagree. It must be remembered also that the diocesan educational accomplishments of 1937-1966 included not only the increase of schools but also the expansion of the diocesan catechetical program.

To staff the new schools, the Bishop welcomed into the diocese several new religious orders of teaching priests, brothers and sisters. He also welcomed several religious communities that sought diocesan locations for their own schools or houses. The orders of men included two groups of Capuchins; two groups of Carmelites; the Polish Friars Minor; the Society of the Atonement; the Trappist Cistercians (Our Lady of the Genesee Abbey); and the Benedictines (Mount Saviour Monastery). In Elmira, the Dominican Nuns of the Perpetual Rosary opened a cloistered convent. In Rochester, the Religious of the Cenacle launched a retreat house for women. Other orders of women came into the diocese to undertake educational, catechetical or domestic work.

(Continued on Page 15)



With Bishop Lawrence B. Casey of Paterson, N.J., who was named auxiliary bishop to Bishop Kearney