

Building and Rebuilding Mercy

A Brief History of the Sisters of Mercy In the Diocese of Rochester, 1857-1982



The following account of the history of the Rochester Sisters of Mercy is based on research by Sister Mary Florence Sullivan, RSM, archivist of the local congregation.

Accompanied by Bishop John Timon of Buffalo, Mother Mary Frances Xavier Warde and six comparatively young and adventurous Sisters of Mercy left Providence, R.I., by train June 5, 1857 on the first leg of their journey to found a new establishment of Sisters of Mercy in Rochester.

Four days later the bishop celebrated Mass in the 9 South St. chapel of the convent in St. Mary's Irish Parish. June 9 is commemorated as the Foundation Day by the Rochester congregation.

With Mother Frances' assistance, the congregation immediately began a program of visiting the sick. The Irish parishioners were already familiar with this activity of the "walking nuns," as they were called in Dublin, the city of their founding 25 years earlier.

Mother Frances, following on the pattern established by the congregation's founder, Mother Catherine McAuley, remained a month with the new Rochester group, helping set up a daily schedule and organizing a program for training new-comers to the congregation.

The sisters immediately began preparing to open a "free school" in the basement of the church for poor children. They ran advertisements in the daily press announcing the opening of the Academy of the Immaculate Conception for Young Ladies. The courses included "all branches of a thorough English education also, French-Music-Drawing-Useful and Ornamental Needlework and Wax Flowers (a popular craft at the time)."

Once the school was launched, the women religious established a House of Mercy, a place of "protection of distressed women of good character." Such women were out of work due to the depression of 1857. They were provided with sustenance and asked to help with domestic chores in return. They were never considered servants of the sisters, but individuals being trained for better jobs when times improved.

The establishment was enlarged in later years and an employment office was added.

Within a year of their Rochester foundation, the sisters also opened a Soup Kitchen, with assistance from the St. Vincent's Men's Society. Each unemployed man with a ticket from the society was able to eat daily hot soup and bread. It is recorded that members of the community "didn't believe there was a hungry man in Rochester in 1858 because of the number served."

Bishop Timon, impressed



The third and present motherhouse for the Sisters of Mercy in Rochester, above, is located at 1437 Blossom Road. The building was constructed in 1931. Prior to that, the order resided first at 9 South St. next to Old St. Mary's Church, downtown. The building was used from 1857 until fire destroyed the structure in 1916. Today on the site is a shrine to Our Lady, right, titled "The Madonna of the Highways." The sisters then moved to 90 St. John's Park near Charlotte Beach, below right, where they lived until 1931. Shortly after moving to their Blossom Road location, the congregation sold the house to the American Legion and it is now the site of the Ira Jacobson Post No. 474.

with the labors of the sisters, asked twice in the first five years that they established two other foundations, one in Buffalo; one in Batavia.

The prelate died in 1867, just as Rome was considering dividing the diocese. During that period, Father Michael Creedon, pastor of Holy Family in Auburn, asked the sisters to staff the parish school. The sisters took up residence in Auburn in September that year; and within a short time they, too, launched an extensive visiting program which had on its schedule the women's section of Auburn State Prison.

The new Diocese of Rochester was created in March 1968, with Bishop Bernard J. McQuaid named a few months later to head it.

The bishop immediately began to pursue a program of establishing a school in every parish in his diocese and also began looking for women religious to staff the schools. In his search, however, he bypassed the Sisters of Mercy. It is thought that the pontifical status given the congregation by Pope Gregory XVI, which would make it difficult for a local ordinary to control the internal government of the congregation, was the reason for his action.

Nevertheless, Father James Stewart, pastor of St. Mary's, built for the congregation a "large spacious and modern school with the latest facilities," which opened its doors to more than 500 boys and girls in 1873.

Also in that year, the sisters opened an industrial school for orphan girls in their teens. This school was administered by the Rochester Board of Education which hired the sisters to supervise and teach.

In 1883, on the urging of Father Stewart, the sisters opened a day-care center, a

"creche," staffed in part by volunteers, the forerunners of the Mercy Guild.

Around the turn of the century, the congregation was given a parcel of land in what is now the 23rd Ward (Charlotte), upon which it built a summer residence for both ill sisters and the children of the industrial school.

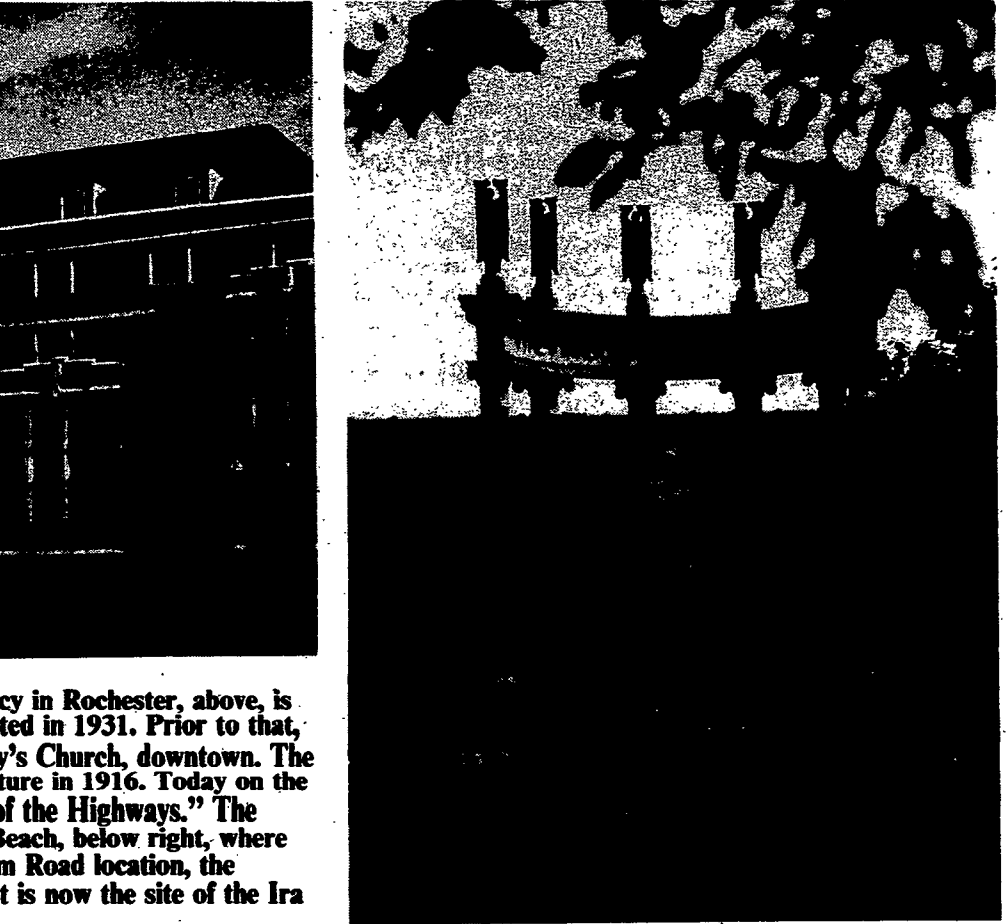
Also during this period, Bishop McQuaid succeeded in "redistricting" the diocese, annexing the counties of Steuben, Schuyler, Chemung and Tioga. An independent group of Sisters of Mercy (which had actually sprung from the Batavia foundation by the Rochester group) staffed institutions in each of these counties, and had earlier united as an independent community with a motherhouse in Hornellsville.

The bishop was reported as not pleased with the arrangement and two years later took steps to amalgamate the Hornellsville group with Rochester. The union was completed July 26, 1901.

In 1906, the sisters began staffing Holy Cross School in Charlotte, the first such venture for the sisters in the northern tier since 1867.

Bishop McQuaid died Jan. 18, 1909, and Bishop Thomas Hickey succeeded him. He had been taught by the Sisters of Mercy at St. Mary's, and under his episcopacy, the congregation began to flourish in parish schools. First at Mt. Carmel, and followed by St. Andrew's, St. John the Evangelist, St. Francis of Assisi, Auburn; St. Vincent's, Corning; and St. John's, Clyde, all within the first six years of his reign.

In the middle of winter, 1916, the Mercy motherhouse burned down, and those housed there took up residence in the Charlotte home where they remained until 1931 when the



motherhouse on Blossom Road opened.

In the 1920s, the sisters assumed apostolates at Camp Stella Maris, in catechetical programs for public school pupils, and at several more schools, including Aquinas Institute. In the last part of the decade, the sisters opened Our Lady of Mercy High School and welcomed the first freshman class, Sept. 8, 1928.

The Blossom Road property was developed continuously through 1959.

A time of testing was soon upon the congregation.

The 1960s were a time of extraordinary exhilaration, and yet a time of profound social and religious revolution and renewal, occasioned for the religious in large measure by the Second Vatican Council.

And the period was not without its cost. The congregation began to dwindle, leaving unfulfilled commitments and empty places.

The Catherine McAuley College, an institution for the spiritual, intellectual and

social formation of aspiring Sisters of Mercy, opened in 1951, closed its doors in 1966. The voluminous habit of serge and linen and starch at first gave way to a simple designer dress and veil, then to even simpler clothing, until today when the present constitution defines the habit as "a silver ring as a sign of consecration. Other accepted symbols among our congregations are the Mercy Cross and a simple habit."

But all of this merely reflected deeper changes. The congregation, commissioned to do so by Rome, began to revitalize itself through a renewal of the spirit of its founder, Catherine McAuley. This in turn occasioned bold forays into new apostolates, a process still in its early stages.

In 1974, the Andrew Center was opened, providing foster care in a Christian environment for a child who needs immediate placement.

The Joseph Avenue Inner City Apostolate, including a storefront service center, opened in 1965, and perhaps not remarkably, has followed nearly the exact pattern of expanding apostolates as did the St. Mary's foundation a

century earlier.

Among the brand-new apostolates: one sister is executive director of Rochester Interfaith Jail Ministry, another serves as the Registered Physicians Assistant at the MacDonald Medical Center in Woodhull, yet another is a nuclear medicine technologist, a fourth is a dean at Monroe Community College.

And structuring all of this the sisters are now developing new forms of government, both locally and internationally.

As the sisters near their 125th anniversary in Rochester, they renew their commitment to respond as did Catherine McAuley, "to follow Jesus Christ in His compassion for suffering people." They make a public, permanent commitment "to live in chastity, poverty and obedience... and to serve the poor, sick and uneducated."

They strive to reverence the dignity of all persons; and, as it is stated in their core constitution, they know that "only through God's mercy can they themselves be merciful."