

ST. MARY'S 1853 1983

The heart of downtown Rochester NY

St. Mary's Church and City Join in Celebrating History

By John Dash

At the same time that the City of Rochester prepares to launch its sesquicentennial celebration, a church that has stood at the center of its religious, cultural and, often, civic life also is observing 150 years since its foundation.

The church, Old St. Mary's, has laid a justifiable claim on the title, "St. Mary's, the heart of downtown Rochester," not just for its physical presence, but also for its recognized status as a gathering place for a number of religious activities which mark significant points in the city's cultural year.

And even beyond that, it provides a burgeoning ministry to city dwellers.

St. Mary's is the oldest surviving Catholic church in the city, its cornerstone laid by Bishop John Timon of Buffalo, Sept. 18, 1853; its consecration, also by Bishop Timon, Oct. 24, 1858.

One of its pastors was a chaplain in the Civil War. It was the site for extraordinary social service projects: a soup kitchen, an orphanage, a shelter for women, all more than 100 years ago.

Twice the parish was on the verge of dissolution, and twice it was brought back to a thriving community.

And as it looks back on its own history and tries to ascertain something of the future, the Old St. Mary's parish staff sees something very vibrant, very new.

The parish now boasts a staff which includes Father James Lawlor, pastor; Sister Sheila Walsh, and Sister Joan Sobala, pastoral assistants; Joan Young, pastoral minister; Bishop Joseph L. Hogan, minister to the Third Age; Sister Kathy Milliken, communications consultant; and in residence, the revered Msgr. James McAniff, pastor emeritus.

Not long past, Father Lawlor admitted recently, it was a touch and go situation. He had been named pastor of the parish, and a number of parishioners became dis-



Staff members, clockwise from upper left, Sisters Joan and Sheila, Mrs. Young and Father Lawlor.

traught and left. Attendance at Mass dropped sharply and measures that were considered "innovations" in worship caused harsh criticism.

That has now changed, the staff reported. Mrs. Young commented that after the fury, "those who stayed have taken a delight in the church. One commented, 'My church has become a parish again.'"

And indeed, it is a measure of the vitality of the congregation that it projects hospitality. Newcomers are invited, for instance, to breakfast after Mass.

"What a warm and friendly place," a visitor to the city from the Netherlands said recently of the church.

Sunday attendance numbers now about 600, each congregant welcomed or recognized by members of the parish staff.

"I think most parishes find 'a thing,'" Father Lawlor said; his parish differs from neighboring parishes in its attempt to minister to the area's "many people on the fringe of society."

In a second instance, a newcomer remarked to the staff, "Nobody has ever asked me for my ideas before."

As Father Lawlor put it, "We're seizing the opportunity, looking for ideas on how to go about this collective enterprise of being Church."

It is not to say that St. Mary's does not engage in certain ministries by now standard in the diocese.

Under the leadership of Joan Young and her husband, the parish is starting up a divorced and separated group, to which "hopefully, we'll also pull from the business community," she said' and a marriage preparation team.

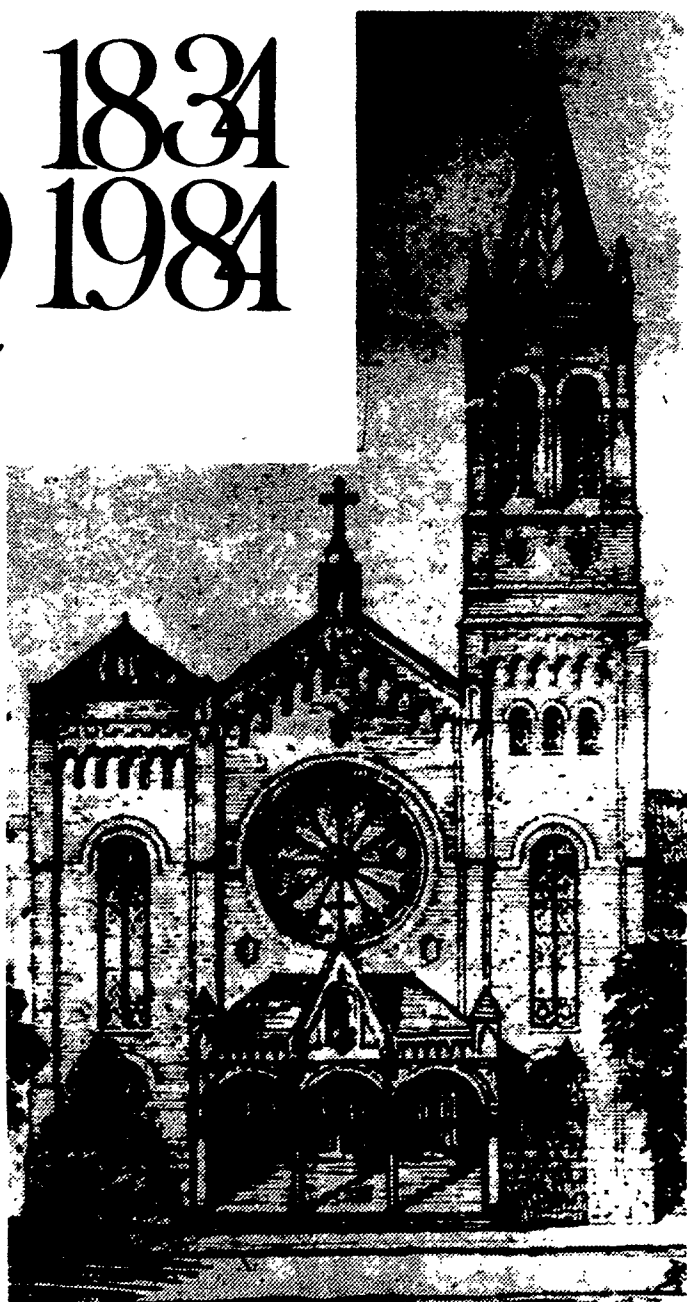
But the major element remains unique, the sense of hospitality. As Sister Kathy said, "Friendliness and hospitality here is something that spreads. In time, the intangible becomes obvious."

And food can be a big part of that. "It's not just the Army that travels on its stomach," Father Lawlor quipped. "And people don't leave the Church just because of theology."

So wine and cheese becomes an element for welcoming new parishioners, and "listening to them," Sister Joan said.

A curious situation, perhaps, is that the parish tithes; not necessarily the parishioners, but the administration.

One has the impression that finances are not a major worry of the present pastor, and one learns that an investment portfolio developed earlier this century has served the parish well.



An architect's rendering of the church with its steeple, Dec. 23, 1939.

Besides that, "St. Mary's receives a monthly income from rental of one of its adjacent parking lots, income that is more than what is needed to adequately support the parish program. In the spirit of tithing, we feel that sharing this income with those in need is an important way of demonstrating our parish commitment to our own members in need as well as to the broader community," a parish publication "Tintinnabula," said.

The parish set up a tithing fund, the object of which was to set aside \$500 a month "to promote the Church's social mission through providing financial assistance, food, clothing, shelter and medical costs for those in need."

Funds are available to any needy individual or organization seeking help in the following order of priority: parish members, relatives, friends; interparish needs; anyone within parish geo-

graphic boundaries; all others, including foreign missions.

Over the Summer, \$1,150 was disbursed from the fund.

As the parish approaches its sesquicentennial, it is planning a number of festivities, from a Dec. 31 ecumenical service and party, to a jubilee celebration of Mass by Bishop Matthew H. Clark, July 8.

Already under way is a series of talks on history and theology, and impending is a concert by the Rochester Philharmonic honoring both St. Mary's and its sister sesquicentennial, the Baptist Temple, and publication of a new parish history.

For downtown visitors and shoppers, the church is open for the celebration of Mass at 7:30 a.m. and 12:10 p.m. during the week. The weekend liturgy schedule includes Masses at 4 p.m., Saturday; and 8:30, 10 and 11:30 a.m., Sunday.



The parish van is a recognizable symbol of St. Mary's on downtown Rochester streets (or sidewalks). Often driven by Sister Sheila, far left, it carries passengers from Bishop Hogan to senior citizens to Eastman School students.

Old St. Mary's Church in Rochester is actually the first air-conditioned Catholic Church, parishioners noted this week, correcting a recent news story which named a Brooklyn church as the first.

The account in a New York paper said that the Regina Pacis Shrine now under construction in Flatbush, was having installed the first air conditioning ever put in a Catholic Church, a statement successfully challenged by Old St. Mary's goes.

The air conditioning system installed in 1947 in the Rochester Church by the Rev. Dr. George D. Kettell, pastor, made St. Mary's not only the first, but presently the only church in the state so equipped. It is also the first Catholic church in the United States to install such equipment, although Baptist churches in Omaha, Neb., and Wichita, Kan., now have the system.

Old St. Mary's Claims First To Airconditioning

A clipping from the Aug. 4, 1949 issue of the Courier-Journal.