

Features

# Historic Rochester church may mark its last anniversary

By Father Robert F. McNamara

When Rochester's Holy Redeemer Church marks its 110th birthday this coming Tuesday, the occasion will likely be its last. Its few remaining parishioners having been transferred two years ago to nearby St. Francis Xavier, Holy Redeemer now stands empty, awaiting a nearly inevitable rendezvous with a wrecking ball.

Only what some might term a miracle — an initial investment of \$300,000 for repairs, plus \$50,000 per year for upkeep — could forestall that painful assignation.

Yet fortune was not always so unkind to this distinguished church, which was dedicated October 27, 1887, by Rochester's first bishop, Bernard J. McQuaid. Marking the corners of what were then called Hudson and Clifford streets, Most Holy Redeemer became the fifth German church established in Rochester. As late as 1942, it was still a major parish, with a population of nearly 4,000, 500 students in the parish school and a teaching staff that included 14 School Sisters of Notre Dame.

The Redemptorist Fathers stationed at St. Joseph's German Church downtown founded the parish that came to bear their divine patron's name. In 1867, a brick building housing both a church and a school was dedicated on the southwest corner of the church lot, at Hudson and Alphonse streets — or, as it was then called, St. Alphonsus Street. The school opened that fall with the School Sisters in charge of the girls. Holy Redeemer Church itself remained merely a mission of St. Joseph's Church for the next two years.

In 1869, Father Fidelis Oberholzer, the first resident pastor arrived from German Switzerland. Father Oberholzer was a secular priest who brought with him the experience of 12 years in parish work. His Rochester pastorate, vigorous both spiritually and materially, continued until 1902. In 1870, he took up residence in the charming new brick rectory, with its fancy carpentered front porch and its windowed cupola.

## Growth spurt

The parish grew so fast thereafter that in 1876, 25 marriages and 146 baptisms were recorded. Both church and school were becoming overcrowded, so on May 10, 1876, the pastor broke ground for a larger church to the south of the rectory.

Father Oberholzer had already engaged as architect Christian Knebel. Knebel and his son, Oscar, were natives of Westphalia, Germany, who had come to Rochester in 1866. The painted-brick building they created had two features of special note.

Its interior was designed without the columns that so often interfere with sight and sound, and its facade was flanked by twin towers topped by octagonal pear-shaped domes, terminating in crosses that rose to a height of 196 feet. The domes are reminiscent of Russian-inspired domes that crown many a baroque church in Bavaria and the Austrian Tyrol.

Construction was speedy but careful, and the total cost was \$50,000. Furthermore, the church was already paid for by the dedication day; Bishop McQuaid's praise of the pastor's arithmetic was fully deserved.

A few additional details were completed before the decade ran out. In 1879, three bells were hung in the southern tower. Cast by the Buckeye Bell Company of Cincinnati at a total cost of \$1,000, they were consecrated in honor of the Redeemer (the 2,900-pound bell), the Sacred Heart of Jesus (1,900 pounds) and the Holy Heart of Mary (1,500 pounds). The parish societies footed the bill. In October of 1880, a clock with four faces was installed in the same tower.



The onion-shaped domes of Most Holy Redeemer Church have looked down upon the intersection of Hudson and Clifford avenues for more than a century.

The only other major changes in the second Holy Redeemer Church were made in 1926 by Father F. William Stauder, the third pastor (1923-55). Having restored the roof and painted the exterior, he replaced the original saints' windows in the nave with patterned windows of gold-toned glass made by the Pike Stained Glass Studio. He also removed the galleries in the transepts, and mounted mural paintings, each measuring about 20x30 feet, on both transept walls.

The subject on the left wall was the Nativity of Jesus; on the right was the Adoration of the Eucharist. These able paintings, executed in pastel tones, were the work of a Hungarian artist named J. Kebley, who had just returned from captivity in Russia during World War I.

## Fine facilities

Father Oberholzer's other contribution to the parish plant was the fine convent of 1890, which also was designed by Oscar Knebel. The second pastor, Father Jacob F. Staub (1902-1923), continued Oberholzer's building tradition. He set up the heating apparatus in

a separate building, constructing tunnels to the other buildings large enough both to accommodate the pipes and to serve as corridors in bad weather. The new school, completed in 1911 on the site of the original church/school, was also his creation.

But as a man dedicated to social welfare, he was rightly proudest of the parish recreational building, Concordia Hall, which was constructed in 1907. It housed a gymnasium and bowling alley in the basement; library space and meeting rooms for the many parish organizations on the first and second floors; and on top, an 800-seat theater with a stage that was fully equipped, even to the point of a "thunder machine." Rochester's Blackfriars theatre company had its start in this auditorium.

The elaborate parish plant belied the simple means of its parishioners, many of whom lived simply in rows of identical one-and-one-half story frame "cottage houses" that still stand on the surrounding streets. Blue-collar craftsmen, the lion's share were employees of Fashion Park, Timely, Hickey-Freeman and other neighborhood clothing factories.

Hard-working and thrifty, these Holy Redeemer folk counted themselves fortunate to be under the spiritual, social and material guidance of a succession of able and respected German pastors, and they wanted their parish facilities to be the very best.

Although they were German, the parishioners made a very American contribution to World War I. They had their honor roll of parish servicemen; they mourned their parish battle casualties. German had been taught in the parochial school up until that time; after the war, it was no longer used, even in the pulpit, although the old-timers continued to confess in German.

And their German nationalism did not make the Holy Redeemer family exclusive. When Lithuanian neighbors organized St. George's parish in 1906, Holy Redeemer offered them the temporary use of its own facilities. The same was true of the Byzantine-rite Ukrainians of St. Josephat's Parish in 1911, and the Poles of St. Teresa's in 1927. All three of these non-German congregations erected churches within a short radius of Hudson and Clifford.

## Declining roles

Ironically, the financial boom that followed the end of World War II brought hard times upon Holy Redeemer. Salaries soared, and the younger parishioners began to move into the suburbs, particularly northward into Irondequoit. In the early 1970s — during the pastorate of Monsignor Joseph Vogt — the parish population declined drastically.

His successor, Father Edwin T. Metzger (1975-1980) fought a losing battle to keep the parish financially afloat. When the pastorate of Father William B. Leone ended with the St. Francis merger in 1985, total Sunday Mass attendance was only 200 in a building that seats 1,000 at a time. Upkeep had become a nightmare. "We are the slaves of the buildings," Father Leone said in deep frustration.

Even after the parishioners were transferred to St. Francis Xavier, a difficult question remained: What should be done with the Holy Redeemer buildings? Fortunately, the Ibero-American Action League had taken over Concordia Hall as early as 1968, and the East House Corporation had acquired the convent in 1976 for use as a community residence — or halfway house — for chemically dependent people. And negotiations were underway for the unoccupied school building.

A prospective buyer for the church, school and heating plant had appeared, but the deal fell through. Eventually it became clear that the church was not marketable, and the pastor began to prepare it for demolition. The pews, windows and murals were sold. St. Michael's parish spoke for the chandeliers; St. Thomas the Apostle for the bells.

Expressions of grief have not been wanting, of course, as doomsday approaches. Raymond Warth, a lifelong parishioner mourns as terrible the impending destruction of his home church. "The loss of the church is a shame," says Father Francis E. Vogt, another Holy Redeemer native, the nephew of one pastor (Father Staub) and the brother of another, (Father Vogt). Father Walter J. Carron, who was assistant pastor at Holy Redeemer from 1938-1946 laments the destruction of a parish "that was so outstanding and such a blessing to people on several levels."

## Image of survival

Likewise the Democrat and Chronicle editorially expressed the sentiment of many in the Rochester community: "The spires of Holy Redeemer are too beautiful to lose." But even its dearest friends would prefer to have Holy Redeemer razed than to watch it fall into slow decay.

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## CARING IS SHARING

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