

# Diocesan seminary's history reflects societal trends

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** As part of the *Catholic Courier's* centennial celebration, we have asked diocesan archivist/historian Father Robert F. McNamara to write a monthly series of articles, each of which will focus on the primary news events of a specific decade in the *Courier's* history. Father McNamara begins the series this month with a look at the 1890s.

**By Father Robert F. McNamara**  
Guest contributor

Without a doubt, the most notable diocesan occurrence of the 1890s was the opening in 1893 of St. Bernard's Seminary.

The ecumenical council held at Trent, Italy, (1545-1653) sought to improve the education and formation of Catholic priests. It therefore decreed that, wherever possible, each bishop should operate a seminary in his own diocese as part of the Church's response to the Protestant Reformation.

In 1868, Bernard J. McQuaid was installed as the first bishop of the Diocese of Rochester. Within a year he had set up a preparatory seminary, St. Andrew's, a modest, non-resident high school. When Bishop McQuaid went to Rome in 1879 for his first diocesan report, however, Pope Leo XIII and other papal officials asked him whether he also had a theological seminary.

Technically, McQuaid was not obliged to establish a divinity school, for his was a small diocese of only 70,000 population. But the pope's query came as a challenge to this bishop who loved challenges and who had already founded and run a major seminary in Newark, N.J. Hence he decided to vault over all possible obstacles and give to the Diocese of Rochester a theological

school of its own, and a good one, too.

The bishop began to plan, commending the whole project to the intercession of the souls in purgatory. Mrs. Richard Vernam, a convert to Catholicism, contributed the first \$50 to the building fund. From then until the 1920s, lay solicitors in every parish went around each year from door to door collecting funds for the seminary. The donations were not large, but they were consistent, and they formed the undergirding of the seminary's construction and maintenance.

In the 1880s, Bishop McQuaid secured 20 rural riverside acres on Lake Avenue Boulevard as a seminary site. He engaged Rochester's noted architect, Andrew Jackson Warner, to draw up plans for an imposing complex. Dedicated with solemnity on its patronal feast of St. Bernard, August 20, 1893, St. Bernard's diocesan theological school opened on Sept. 4, with 39 local seminarians and a small faculty of diocesan priests.

When classes began in the fall of 1894, the student body included for the first time candidates from dioceses other than Rochester, giving the local students a wider exposure to the universal church and offering Bishop McQuaid the opportunity of providing "free places" to students from poorer dioceses in the South, Cuba and the Philippines. As James Hennessey said in his book *American Catholics*, McQuaid's theological school became "one of the nation's best." This upward trend continued through the 1950s, with post-World War II enrollment rising well above 250.

Reverses came, however, in the 1960s. The Rochester seminary, like most American Catholic seminaries, was thrown off balance both by the general social unrest



File photo

This aerial photograph shows St. Bernard's Seminary in 1966.

and by the particular turmoil in the Catholic Church that followed the Second Vatican Council.

In 1965, the seminary abolished its college department — which since 1931 had granted bachelor of arts degrees — retaining St. Andrew's as a high school and St. Bernard's as a theological school. To replace its college department, the diocese opened a house of studies, Becket Hall, near St. John Fisher College, Rochester.

Vatican II (1962-1965) occasioned a domino-effect of changes at St. Bernard's proper. The new stress on ecumenism led to interdenominational field work — work that necessitated student-owned cars and a resultant modification of the seminary schedule. Furthermore, when Fulton J. Sheen became bishop of Rochester in 1966, he made a great effort to bring to St. Bernard's a number of distinguished visiting professors, both Catholic and Protes-

tant.

Now, too, for the first time, sisters, laymen and laywomen were invited to take courses at the seminary. Also in 1968, St. Bernard's joined a local theological consortium, the Rochester Center for Theological Studies, whose other charter members were Colgate Rochester Divinity School (a Baptist-chartered institution) and Bexley Hall (an Episcopalian seminary). Two advantages of this affiliation were that St. Bernard's in 1969 received state authorization to grant theological degrees, and in 1971 won accreditation from the Association of Theological Schools.

Soon, however, two trends of the 1970s began to pose a threat to the seminary's very existence. One was the sharp nationwide decline in priestly vocations, and the other was an ever-spiraling inflation. The seminary faculty and trustees hoped to ride out the resultant storm. They were sur-

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