

# Second bishop pioneered Charities' founding

By Father Robert F. McNamara  
Guest contributor

The *Courier's* third decade ran from 1909 to 1919. World War I dominated the decade's international scene. What was the banner event in the annals of the Diocese of Rochester?

Unquestionably, the establishment, beginning in 1912, of Rochester Catholic Charities. Today this umbrella association is thriving; and during its years of elaboration it has chalked up many notable achievements.

In the earlier years of the diocese, Catholics were diligently schooled in the Christian obligation to perform the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Even the poorest of our immigrants did not forget the financial and social needs of their fellow parishioners. Almost every parish had some sort of aid society and mutual-benefit association. When interparochial beneficent institutions were set up — like hospitals, orphanages, or St. Ann's Home for the Aged — Catholics rallied to their support by regular donations, participation in benefit fairs, and contributed services.

As our civilization became more industrialized, however, Americans in general saw the wisdom of organizing disparate almsgiving projects into more comprehensive associations. Greater efficiency alone seemed to demand it.

As early as the fall of 1908, for instance, Rochester civic leaders began to agitate in favor of an amalgamation of local charities. When this movement met to organize, Rochester Protestants, Jews and Catholics all sent representatives. The end product was United Charities of Rochester, incorporated on May 17, 1910.

Now, although UCR assumed that its constituent denominational partners would retain their identity, Rochester's second bishop, Thomas F. Hickey, later concluded that United Charities had somehow infringed on the autonomy of the Catholic beneficial institutions. He therefore withdrew from the affiliation. UCR eventually trimmed its own aims, and continues today as Family Service of Rochester.

The bishop realized, nevertheless, that even the Catholic almsgiving societies



File Photo  
**Thomas F. Hickey, Rochester's second bishop, founded the Catholic Charity Guild in 1912.**

could profit by closer cooperation. Therefore, in 1912, he founded the Catholic Charity Guild. The bishop himself was president; Fathers John F. O'Hern and Jacob Staub were vice presidents; Miss Mary Jennings was general secretary; and Miss Elizabeth McSweeney was general treasurer.

Basically, however, the new organization was a women's aid association. By the end of the year the membership had risen to 200. Financed frugally by dues, gifts and "benefits," the guild volunteers reached out into several benevolent fields, especially among the local immigrants: catechetics, settlement-type work, supervised recreation, visitation and nursing, general aid to the poor. In 1914 the guild also helped to launch a residence for young women, the St. Elizabeth Guild House. In the same year it acquired a warehouse for the storage of clothing and furniture, which also became its first central office. Father Staub worked there part time; Elizabeth McSweeney on a full-time volunteer basis.

Expansion, of course, necessitated surer financing. In April, 1915, Bishop Hickey set up the Catholic Men's Charity League. During the next two years the league collected an annual \$7,000; but even this was inadequate. The bishop then asked the men's organization to explore better methods of funding. The problem he faced in Rochester was one that also troubled the other Catholic bishops of New York State. When these bishops met in early 1917 to discuss the matter, they decided to delegate Bishop Hickey and Thomas B. Cusack, the bishop of Albany, to present to the New York State Legislature a bill for the incorporation of the charities of each diocese. Bishop Hickey therefore had his diocesan attorney draw up an "Act to Incorporate Catholic Charities Aids Associations." The act passed and was signed into law on April 24, 1917.

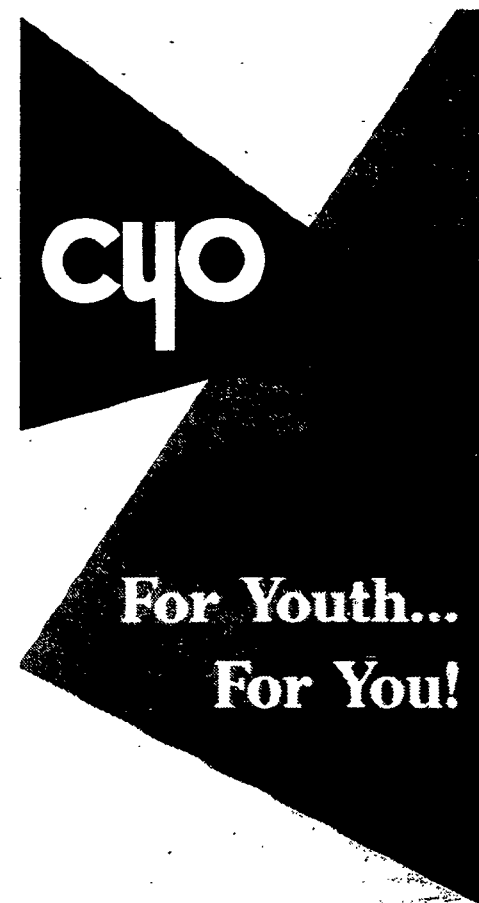
In June, the Rochester diocese proceeded to incorporate its "Rochester Catholic Charities Aid Association," whose aim was to coordinate several charities already functioning, and others to come. The RCCAA (it was officially renamed "Rochester Catholic Charities" only on reincorporation in 1924) now undertook a campaign for funds. The goal set was \$50,000 — the most daring appeal in diocesan history. To the surprise and delight of Bishop Hickey, \$77,000 was pledged to the cause.

Also in 1917, William T. Nolan was hired as executive secretary, and the Catholic Charities Guild was renamed the "Relief Department of Catholic Charities." Then in 1918 the various interdenominational agencies of Rochester began to consider uniting to promote the "Rochester War Chest." This time Bishop Hickey said

that the RCCAA would be willing to be a constituent member on condition that it retain its autonomy. Industrialist George Eastman, the prime mover in the project, saw no objections.

This collaboration in the Rochester "War Chest" was so effective that when in 1919 it was decided to replace the "War Chest" with a "Community Chest," the Catholic Charities Association was happy to join the movement on the same understanding of remaining autonomous. Bishop Hickey became one of the directors of the new "Chest." Diocesan participation in Rochester's "United Way" continues to this day.

Rochester Catholic Charities was therefore developing in professionalism. Although it continued to focus on the see-city rather than on the whole diocese, from 1930 on it did have a working relationship with Elmira Catholic Charities, established in that year. In 1949, RCC was reincorporated as "Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Rochester." The name of the social-welfare department was then changed to "Catholic Family Center," and the whole organization moved towards decentralization. It took over the reins in Elmira with its "Southern Tier Office," and also established an Auburn branch (later supplanted by a "Finger Lakes Office"). Both re-



File Photo  
**Camp Stella Maris, one of many agencies founded under the Catholic Charities umbrella, is shown above in an aerial view.**

gional offices are active today.

I confess my own inability to sort out all the departments of this large welfare confederation. The important thing, however, is to note the extent of its multitudinous services to both stable and emergency needs. Thus, it has continued to provide aid to the poor: food and clothing, housing, recreation and instruction, family assistance, youth and geriatric programs. It has expanded counseling facilities and now operates six residences for the developmentally disabled.

But it has also responded effectively to unanticipated challenges, like the resettlement of displaced persons after World War II, of Hungarians in flight after their aborted revolt of 1956, and of refugees from the later Cuban and Haitian revolutions. From 1975 to the present it has likewise found homes for 3,000 Southeast Asians. And these are only a few of the agenda, national and international, of the umbrella organization's varied branches. As second bishop of Rochester (1909-1928), the mild Thomas F. Hickey worked inconspicuously under the shadow of his pioneering predecessor, Bishop McQuaid. But in coordinating the diocesan charities and giving them a new direction, he accomplished on his own something truly notable. A "bravo" to his memory!

What has been accomplished is not due solely, of course, to the second bishop of

Rochester. Nor is it due primarily to the priests who have been in charge — Father Staub, Father (and later Bishop) Walter A. Foery, Monsignor Gerald C. Lambert, and Monsignor Arthur E. Ratigan, to name some of the deceased. Nor is it due primarily to the many religious, particularly women religious, who have devoted themselves to helping our disadvantaged.

It is mostly laymen and laywomen who have staffed Rochester Catholic Charities, and it is high time for them to be given credit. Let a few, now deceased, represent their successors as well: William T. Nolan, executive secretary of the RCCAA; George W. Montgomery, Jr., director of the Catholic Family Center; Elizabeth McSweeney ("Miss Mac"), the archetypal volunteer; Kathleen D'Olier, the first professional social worker; Helen Costello, secretary of Catholic Charities for 50 years; Mary E. Fitzgerald, who founded and for three decades was Elmira Catholic Charities.

All these good people and their later counterparts have gone quietly about their difficult but necessary task since 1912. It is far more than a cup of water that they have given to Christ's little ones. They shall not be deprived of His reward.

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