

Diocese opens archives to preserve history

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

During the late 1930s when the Diocese of Rochester was moving its pastoral offices from St. Patrick's Cathedral on Plymouth Avenue to 50 Chestnut St., diocesan personnel simply threw away old papers and documents.

One priest happened to notice several books in the trash. These books contained the hand-written diaries of Bishop Bernard J. McQuaid, the first Bishop of Rochester — volumes that yielded insights into his opinions and thinking during the formative years of the diocese.

The diaries were saved. But over the years and through subsequent moves, other documents, letters and records of the diocese have been lost.

"It makes you want to tear out what hair you have left," exclaimed Father Robert McNamara, diocesan archivist since 1976.

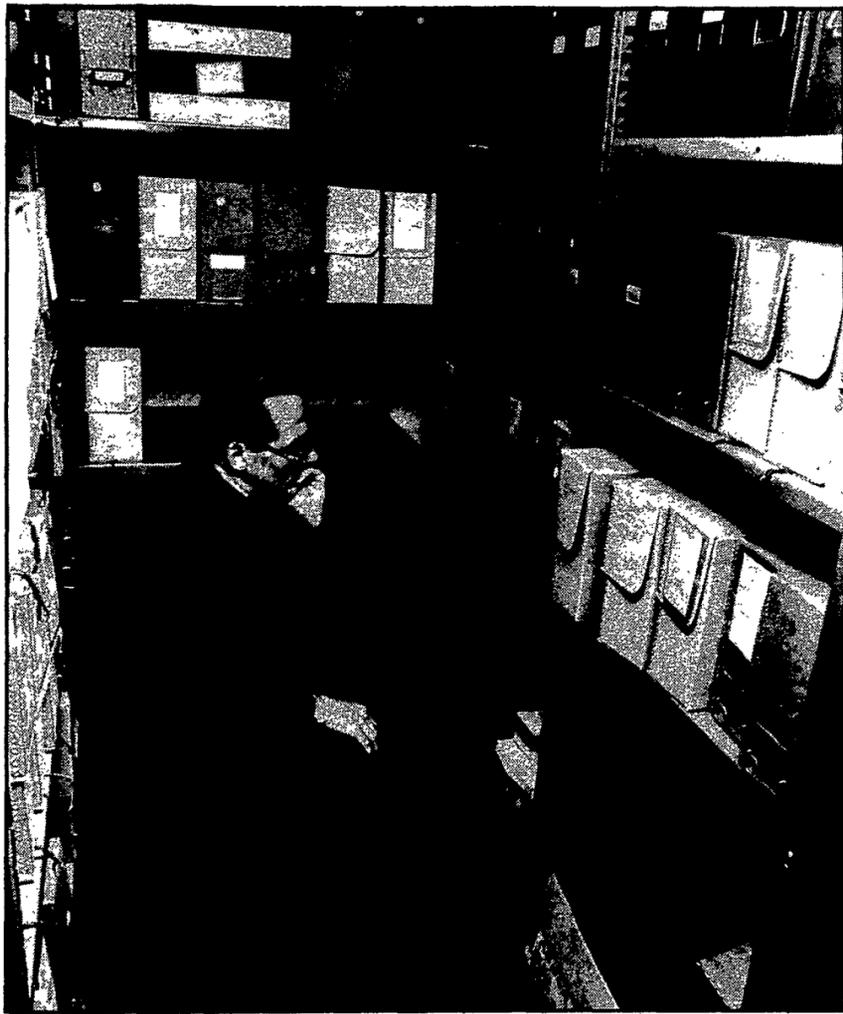
Father McNamara, who has been the diocese's unofficial archivist since the 1930s, has been trying to restore the losses. He has also been campaigning for a permanent home for the diocesan archives, something they have lacked since St. Bernard's Seminary closed in 1981.

On May 24, 1989, Father McNamara's



Father Robert McNamara (center) reads a statement during the dedication of the diocesan archives, as colleagues and diocesan personnel look on. Bishop Matthew Clark (left) blessed and officially opened the facility which will be run under the guidance of Father McNamara and Father William Graf (far left).

Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier



Father Mark Miller, parochial vicar at St. James' Church, looks over some files during the May 24 dedication of the diocesan archives. Father Miller teaches a church history course at St. Bernard's Institute.

dream became a reality when Bishop Matthew H. Clark blessed and officially opened the diocesan archives. The archives, housed in climate-controlled rooms in the basement of the Pastoral Center, are now ready to help scholars and historians with their study and research.

Meanwhile, Father McNamara and the diocese's newly appointed second archivist, Father William Graf, face a formidable task. The documents already in possession of the diocese — more than 35 shelves of material — need to be organized and cataloged. At the same time, the two priests will have to keep up with the new material coming into the collection.

"It could take someone a full year working 40 hours a week" to catalogue the material, Father Graf estimated. He, however, can only work eight hours a week on top of his duties as pastor of Most Precious Blood Parish. He hopes instead to form a core of volunteers who will help with the work of managing the files and establishing a computer catalog of the collection.

But the value of such effort is inestimable, according to Father McNamara.

"You've got to keep your files, not only for practical reference, but also for historical purposes," Father McNamara said. "You can't do without them."

"Our diocese has got such a fantastic history," Father Graf noted. He pointed to the educational innovations of Bishop McQuaid as just one example of a diocesan heritage that can provide not only historical

perspective on the church in the United States, but also a "storehouse of information for the future."

The two archivists bring with them differing gifts. Father McNamara has 50 years of accumulated knowledge about the diocese, having written the official history of the diocese's first 100 years, *The Diocese of Rochester: 1868-1968*. Father Graf, meanwhile, has the technical expertise to deal with archival material, possessing a master's degree in history from the University of Rochester, and having undertaken archival studies.

"He does the arrangement, I answer the questions," Father McNamara quipped.

Both priests expressed satisfaction that the archives finally have a home. They also voiced frustration at the way material has been handled in the past. Not only have potentially valuable documents been lost — including 20 years' worth of parish financial records and spiritual assessments — but material that is still in the collection also has been unavailable for use because it has not been completely organized. "It's there," Father Graf said, "but it's like knowing there's a diamond ring there, but not being able to find it."

Father Graf managed the actual transfer of the archives from St. Bernard's Institute, where they had been stored in an apartment, to the Pastoral Center. In working with the archives since last August, he has already learned a great deal about Rochester's bishops.

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