

Bishop led prayer campaign during WWII

By Father Robert F. McNamara
Guest contributor

What event hit the *Courier* headlines in its sixth decade, 1939-1949? There is no question about it: World War II, its prelude and its sequel, monopolized the news. And if you read through the *Catholic Courier* files from that period, I am sure that you will be impressed, as I have been, by the patriotic leadership of the fifth bishop of Rochester, our beloved Bishop James E. Kearney.

The late 1930s were days of apprehension for lovers of democracy. Europe was increasingly under the sway of the contrasting ideologies of communism and fascism, and in the Far East, Japan was advancing its own form of totalitarianism. While most Catholics considered German Nazism and Italian Fascism as intrinsically less dangerous than atheistic Marxism, all three were repellent. Nazi racial policies were particularly shocking.

On November 19, 1938, an interfaith anti-Nazi rally was held in Rochester's Convention Hall to protest against Hitler's mounting anti-semitism. A month before that, Bishop Kearney had urged members of the diocese to recite the rosary regularly for peace, and had instructed his priests to say the special prayer *pro pace* at every Mass. At the anti-Nazi rally of November 19 he strongly denounced the German campaign against the Jews. Not long afterward, on March 12, 1939, Eugenio Pacelli was elected pope. Anguished by the drift towards war, Pius XII at once launched an appeal for world peace. The bishop of Rochester strongly seconded the pope's entreaty.

World War II broke out, nonetheless,



An American soldier salutes the flag in a 1946 photograph from the *Catholic Courier Journal's Victory Magazine*.

when the Nazis invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Hoping against hope that hostilities might be brief, and particularly that the United States might be spared involvement, Bishop Kearney asked again and again that his people storm heaven. Since our nation was ill-prepared for any sort of armed conflict, however, the federal government began to build up its defensive capacity. Selective Service registration started on October 16, 1940, as the first step in assembling a citizen army.

The spiritual needs of these young draftees during their military service became a new pastoral concern. The chaplains' corps therefore asked the American bishops to

seek volunteers for military ministry. Bishop Kearney proposed this pressing invitation to his priests, and they did not disappoint him. In late October he congratulated and sent off the first two diocesan army chaplains, Fathers Edward J. Waters and Austin B. Hanna. Before the end of the war, 41 diocesan priests and four Rochester-based members of religious orders would join the various armed services. This was an unusually high percentage of the total Rochester clergy. Their wartime record would prove outstanding.

Hopes that we could keep out of the conflict were dashed, of course, when the Japanese attacked the American fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. As Bishop Kearney would point out more than once, this tragic day was the eve of the feast of Mary Immaculate, long the official patroness of the Catholic Church in the United States.

When our country declared war on Japan on December 8, and on Germany and Italy three days later, the bishop quickly pledged full diocesan cooperation — spiritual and material — in the defense of the Allied cause. We must punish, Bishop Kearney said, this "dastardly attack on the flag of our country." He therefore urged his people to take the pledge of allegiance to that flag at Mass the following Sunday, December 14.

Throughout "The Duration," James E. Kearney gave hearty support to our national effort and to its service personnel, but meanwhile he kept strongly insisting on the need for prayer.

With regard to the national effort, he supported the sale of defense stamps and bonds; begged aid for the Red Cross and its

blood bank; and urged cooperation with the drives for old paper, scrap metal, etc. When victory was at last achieved in Europe, he encouraged charitable assistance to the vanquished peoples and to the exiles of war. He approved of the federal census to discover what manpower was available to replace manpower in industry, but he warned against any type of employment that would separate working mothers from their children.

The bishop's constant concern was for the young people in military service. At his request, I kept a census of service personnel from all the parishes in the diocese. The final tally was 31,585. Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Rochester contributed the largest number to the military: 1263. The largest honor roll outside Rochester was that of St. Ann's, Hornell: 606. These were still days in which there were many large Catholic families. So the Moriarty of Scipio Center sent five sons to the colors; the Sweets of Corning, seven; and the Fedeles of Rochester, eight.

Bishop Kearney considered himself almost a member of each patriotic family. He scheduled Mass regularly for service mothers. As the war began to take its toll of the diocesan soldiery (in all 927 men and one woman died), the bishop would offer Masses and prayers for our own war heroes. He also kept in contact by newsletter with his chaplains. He reminded them they were "God's soldiers," working for the good of soldiers of their own and of many other dioceses.

When the federal war effort brought some of its operations into the very territory of his diocese, James E. Kearney wel-

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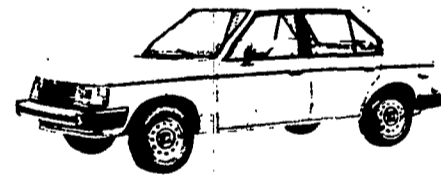
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