

'Teller of tales' conserved decades of diocesan past

By Teresa A. Parsons
Associate editor

ROCHESTER — In the interest of historical accuracy, Father Robert F. McNamara exposed as "a lie" last Wednesday's celebration honoring his 50 years as diocesan archivist.

The 78-year-old priest actually began chronicling diocesan events 51 years ago, in 1938, when he was appointed professor of church history at St. Bernard's Seminary.

Regardless of the timeliness of Father McNamara's anniversary luncheon, priests and bishops who gathered last week at the



Courier file photo

A camera captured the young Father McNamara in front of the oratory of St. Bernardine of Siena a year before the priest's ordination in December, 1936.

Mapledale Party House were glad of an occasion to honor "Bobby," the man who taught most of them — including all three of the diocese's current bishops — about the church's past, and who has preserved much of the diocese's present for future generations.

"If it weren't for Father McNamara, we wouldn't have (diocesan) archives," said Father William Graf, one of Father McNamara's former students and fellow teachers who was recently appointed to organize and catalogue materials in the archives. "It's thanks to him that we in the diocese have a sense of trying to preserve things."

Aside from his contributions to local history, Father McNamara is among the best known and loved of diocesan priests, described by colleagues as "a true gentle man," "a teller of tales," and "a living bank of information, who's kind and gentle about sharing it."

Although he heard the call to priesthood when he was only 14, the Corning native discovered his avocation for history much later by happy accident. The post of diocesan archivist was not formally created until 1976, but Father McNamara adopted the role along with his seminary appointment.

When he replaced Father Frederick J. Zwierlein as professor of church history, Father McNamara inherited the letters of the first Bishop of Rochester, Bernard J. McQuaid, from his biographer. Fearing that the letters would be lost if returned to the chancery, the priest kept them and "started collecting other things."

"I think it was my natural custodial instinct," he said.

English was the major subject he studied while earning a bachelor's degree from Georgetown in 1928, and a master's degree from Harvard University in 1933.

The son of Helen Dwyer and Dr. Thomas A. McNamara — a general practitioner and former mayor of Corning fondly remembered in the Southern Tier as "Old Doc Mac" — Father McNamara then traveled to Rome, where he earned a licentiate in sacred theology from Gregorian University. In 1936, Cardinal Francesco Marchetti Selvaggiani ordained him to priesthood.

One step ahead of World War II, Father McNamara returned in 1937 to Rochester and was assigned to St. Francis Xavier Parish. The following summer, he served briefly as chaplain at St. Ann's Home and associate editor of the *Catholic Courier* before moving to St. Bernard's.

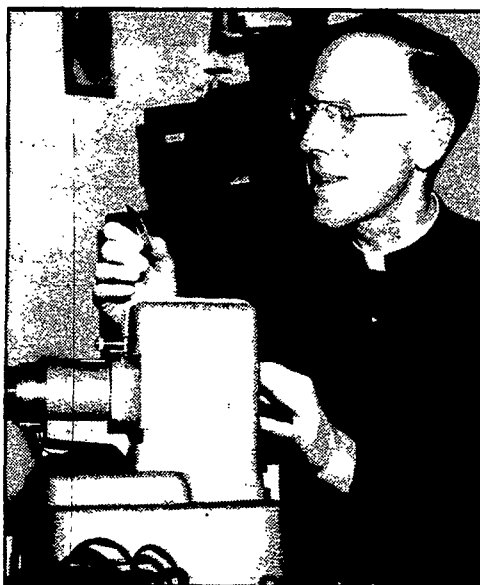
Although he dropped his post as associate editor to take up his appointment at St. Bernard's, Father McNamara has continued to write for the newspaper. In dozens of articles, his meticulous research has illuminated obscure corners of diocesan history, while offering insights into the lives of such legendary characters as Bishop McQuaid.

Father McNamara has also written four books. In 1958, Bishop James E. Kearney commissioned the priest to prepare a history of the diocese in time for the 100th anniversary of the church of Rochester in 1968. The resulting book, *The Diocese of Rochester, 1868-1968*, was published after its patron's death in 1966, and has become the standard reference work on the subject.

In 1975, Father McNamara published a monograph on Catholic preaching in the United States entitled *Catholic Sunday Preaching: The American Guidelines, 1791-1975*.

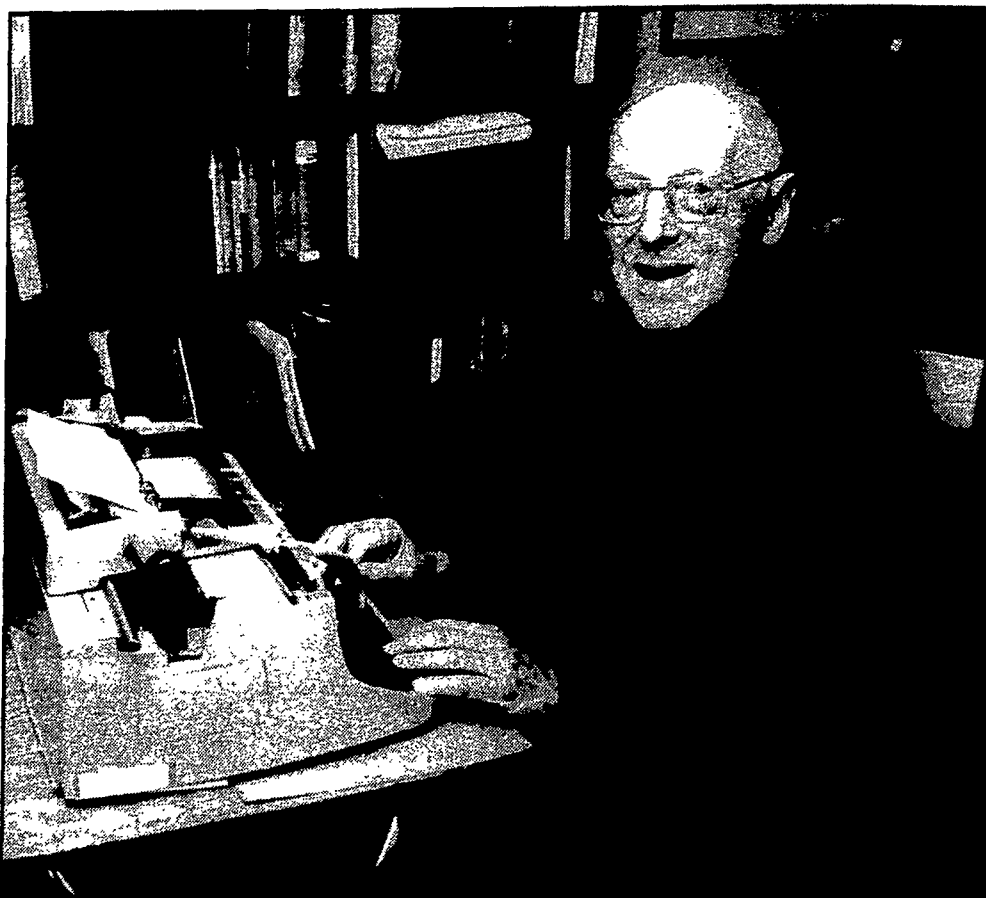
Earlier, he wrote *A Century of Grace*, the history of his home parish, St. Mary's in Corning. But his personal favorite is *The American College in Rome, 1855-1955*, a centennial history of the North American College, where he lived while studying in Rome. "Living in a 16th century building, and living a 16th century life, you couldn't help but be moved," he recalled. "I put my whole heart into that."

Since St. Bernard's Seminary closed in 1981, Father McNamara has lived and worked in the rectory of St. Thomas the Apostle Church on St. Paul Boulevard. Although his mobility has been limited by arthritis, the priest responds to a steady stream of research requests via phone, and continues to shape his research into frequently published articles. He also writes two columns, "All God's Children" and



Courier file photo

During more than 40 years at St. Bernard's Seminary, Father McNamara — shown above in 1961 — taught most priests and all three of the bishops currently serving the diocese.



Courier file photo

Friends of Father Robert F. McNamara last week celebrated more than 50 years of the diocesan archivist's contributions as chief custodian of local church history. Although the former seminary professor's tenure as associate editor of the *Catholic Courier* was brief, he has illuminated diocesan and church history in dozens of *Courier* articles.

"Saints Go Marching," which are syndicated for bulletins by Parish Publications.

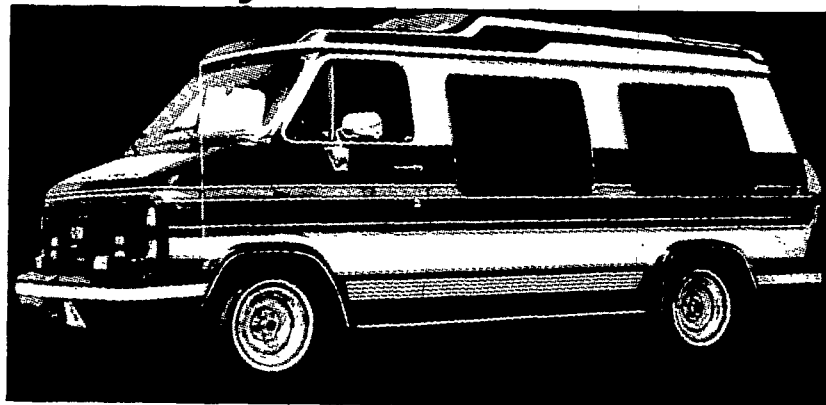
In May, 1989, his years of determined lobbying paid off as Bishop Matthew H. Clark dedicated a new and permanent home for the diocesan archives at the Pastoral Center in Gates. Since the seminary closed, the archives had been housed in a storeroom at Colgate Rochester Divinity School.

One of Father McNamara's proudest ac-

complishments has been inspiring others to preserve the past and present of the local church. "I've encouraged parishes and institutions to write up their own histories, and, partly as a result of the urging and assistance I've been able to give, a number of them have written up some pretty good histories," he said. "If you don't keep records, you don't know where you've been, and therefore you don't know where you're going."

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