

CATHOLIC MISSIONS

Missionaries IN NEW YORK STATE

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forced the missionaries to adapt their teachings.

Since the Indians defined people by relationships, for example, the missionaries came to describe the Trinity as "Our Father, his son and their holy ghost," Father McNamara noted.

The presence of Christians among the Iroquois' Huron captives enabled the missionaries to find a core of believers in all the Indian communities.

At the Indians' continuing suggestion, the two priests encouraged French settlers to found a colony. The resulting French settlement near present-day Liverpool became a mission center, and several more priests joined the two resident Jesuits there.

In August of 1656, Fathers Chaumonot and René Menard ventured into Cayuga County, becoming the first priests to enter what is now part of the Rochester diocese. The Indians built a chapel for them - the first church in the Rochester diocese - near the town of Mapleton.

When conflict again arose between the Iroquois and French, the Jesuits and settlers deserted the settlement in 1658. They returned in 1660, after tensions eased.

This pattern of forced departure and return continued until 1709, when war erupted between the French and British, with whom the Iroquois had allied. But for a few secret visits, Jesuit missionaries were unable to return to upstate New York.

Father McNamara noted that the Jesuits succeeded in converting few Indians during their years of missionary work in New York State. When the Jesuits and French finally left the area, many of the converts went with them to Canada, settling on reservations in what is now the Province of Quebec.

The Rochester archivist observed that the Jesuits' efforts produced few long-term fruits. Yet excavations of Indian gravesites from the era have discovered remains bearing "Jesuit rings" - copper rings bearing crosses or the name of Jesus, he noted.

In addition, Father McNamara said, the Iroquois Christians who accompanied French trappers to Montana told Flathead Indians there about their experiences with "The Blackrobes." As a result, the Flatheads requested that Jesuit missionaries be sent to them, thus opening the door to Jesuit missions in the West.

In the years that followed,

Catholic missionaries occasionally passed through Central and Western New York. But not until immigrants began settling the area in the early 19th century did the second wave of missionary activity begin.

At the time, the entire United States was part of the Diocese of Baltimore, established in 1784. The first church in New York State was St. Patrick's, founded in New York City in 1786. St. Mary's in Albany became the state's second church in 1798.

Western New Yorkers enjoyed only occasional visits from priests during their years of membership in the Baltimore diocese. But when the New York Diocese was created in 1808, priests began to travel through the region more frequently.

The first Catholic church in West/Central New York - and the third in the entire state - was St. John's in Utica, established in 1821. Two years later, the state's fourth church - St. Patrick's in Rochester - was built.

Communities throughout the region gradually began opening parishes in the ensuing years: St. John the Baptist in Syracuse (1827); St. Paul in Oswego (1830); Holy Family in Auburn and St. Francis De Sales in Geneva (1834); St. Jerome in Seneca Falls (1836); St. Peter in Rome (1837); and St. John in Binghamton (1838).

Yet the region had few priests during these early years, Father McNamara said. As settlers moved slowly westward, those few shepherds traveled from town to town, serving Catholics in the developing

faith communities.

The early faith communities began as mission churches, becoming independent parishes only when they had sufficient parishioners and funds - and when a priest became available.

Due to the difficulties of north/south travel in those days, priests from Pennsylvania and New York City - rather than Syracuse and Rochester - more commonly served the Southern Tier region from Binghamton through Elmira and Hornell.

The region's southern counties remained mission territory well into the 1850s, as parishes were gradually established in such communities as Ithaca, Oxford, Hornell, Deposit, Elmira, Norwich, Corning, Cortland and Bath.

Catholicism had taken sufficient hold in the area for the Diocese of Rochester to be created in 1868 and for the Diocese of Syracuse to be formed in 1886. Yet there is no clear point at which the region ceased to be mission territory, Father McNamara acknowledged.

And amid today's priest shortage, he remarked, the church is experiencing what in some ways resembles another missionary era, as more of the region's parishes merge and more priests are called to serve several communities.

"Even today, when you have one priest with several missions, it is like the mission days," he concluded.

On the cover: Detail of a mural at Le Moyne College in Syracuse of Father Simon LeMoigne on a missionary visit to the Iroquois of Central New York. (Photo: Le Moyne College)

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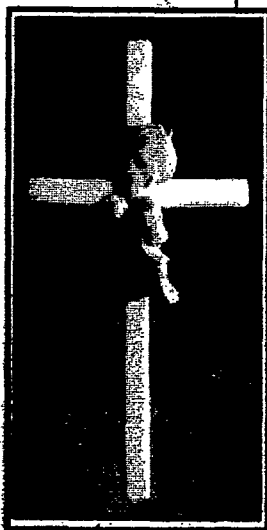
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