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Describing the ethnic "face" of the Diocese of Rochester is an impossible task. Like the country that gave birth to it, the diocese is a composite of faces — some white, some black, some yellow and some brown.

Many of these faces belong to descendants of northern European immigrants — Irish, German, Dutch, Belgian and French families who came to this country in the early 19th century to flee starvation, poverty, religious repression, political persecution and warfare.

These groups formed the heart of the earliest diocesan parishes — parishes that now encompass citizens tied by blood to dozens of nations and regions, from Italy and Poland, Ukraine and Lithuania, Puerto Rico and Mexico, West Africa and Haiti, Armenia and Greece, Vietnam and Cambodia.

The First Catholics

Long before any one dreamed of a Rochester diocese, the region was inhabited by the Cayugas and the Senecas, members of the Iroquois nations. The first Roman Catholic to travel through what is now the Rochester diocese was an adventurous Frenchman named Etienne Brule, an emissary of Samuel de Champlain, founder of Québec.

An explorer and trader, Brule did virtually nothing to spread the faith in the region before his death in 1632 at the hands of a group of Hurons with whom he had a dispute.

By the late 1600s, some Huron slaves of the Iroquois peoples who inhabited the area had already acquainted their captors with the Christian religion of the Europeans. The Hurons had learned Catholicism from their French allies.

Jesuit missionaries further spread the faith by preaching among the Cayugas, who helped them build the first Catholic Church in diocesan territory near what is now Auburn. Erected in 1656, St. Joseph's Chapel was the site of several catechism classes attended by captive Hurons, and eventually, some of the Iroquois themselves.

According to Father McNamara's history, *The Diocese of Rochester — 1868-1968*, 4,000 Iroquois had been baptized into the Catholic

faith by 1679. Yet "the majority of the baptized were ... on the verge of death, and the number of the living Iroquois communicants remained relatively small."

To this day, however, a number of Iroquois descended from these early Catholics still live in the United States and Canada and profess the Catholic faith.

After the Revolution

In November of 1789, Pope Pius VI established the first U.S. Catholic diocese, with Baltimore, Md., as the see city. This huge diocesan territory — including all states of the fledgling nation

— was headed by Bishop John Carroll, brother of Daniel Carroll, a signer of the U.S. Constitution and a cousin to Charles Carroll, a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Historical records show that a Catholic service took place in Yates County as far back as 1786, according to Father McNamara's history. Yet most of the early European settlers belonged to a wide variety of Protestant denominations.

Few missionary priests — and no churches — were present to
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ETHNICITY of the DIOCESE

1ST OF A SEVEN-PART SERIES

BY ROB CULLIVAN