

Diocese boasts 'a world of faces'

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serve the small minority of Catholics living in western New York. The region had become part of the Diocese of New York in 1808, but the handful of clergy and religious available spent almost all of their energies on the thousands of immigrant Irish Catholics in New York City.

The future see city of the Rochester diocese became in 1816 home to the area's first Catholic family — German immigrants John and Anna Klem. In an interview with the *Catholic Courier* Father McNamara pointed out that several of the Klems' descendants and relatives were active in the diocese's development.

In fact, one of the Klems' direct descendants lives at the Basilian residence on Rochester's East Avenue. Father Leo Klem, a retired foreign-language and literature teacher from St. John Fisher College, noted that he is the great-great grandson of Bernard Klem, son of John and Anna.

The Klems were the first drop in a wave of Catholic immigration to this region. Although the majority of settlers in western New York hailed from New England, additional numbers of German, Irish and French Catholics from both New York City and Canada were planting roots in the area.

The Erie Canal

Construction of the Erie Canal, which opened in 1825, gave Catholicism a firm footing in upstate New York, Father McNamara noted. Along with the concurrent expansion of the railway system, the Erie Canal and connecting arteries employed thousands of Catholic immigrants, the diocesan archivist wrote.

"Catholicism in the twelve counties owes a great deal to these man-made rivers and iron highways," Father McNamara asserted in his history. "They not only gave Catholics as immigrants easier access; they also provided them with temporary or permanent jobs at construction and maintenance."

For several years, the nearest church to Rochester was St. Mary's in Albany. By 1823, Rochester's Catholics had erected the now-defunct St. Patrick's Cathedral. The city's Irish immigrants, many who had learned English under British rule, gladly welcomed the parish's establishment. Yet the historical review of another famous Rochester church notes that St. Patrick's pastor, Father Bernard O'Reilly, had a problem. "The trouble was: Father O'Reilly didn't



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know a blessed word of German," wrote Father James J. Galvin, author of the 1961 parish history, *The Bells of St. Joseph*. "There were in Rochester some five hundred Germans: newcomers from Baden, Alsace and the Rhineland who couldn't understand a word the man said."

In 1835, a group of local German Catholics — among them Bernard Klem — bought an African-American Methodist church building on the corner of Minerva Place and Ely Street. A year later, St. Mary's Parish opened its doors, becoming the first Catholic Church solely geared to the city's German population. The parish later changed its name to St. Joseph's.

Father John Nepomucene Neumann, the future Bishop of Philadelphia, gave the first homily in the new German church, Father Galvin noted.

"The sermon had him worried," Father Galvin wrote of the German-speaking priest. "But he

need have had no fears; the poor people were so famished for a sermon in German that they listened with ... rapt attention."

The fledgling congregation eventually moved to Franklin Street, where the now-defunct St. Joseph's Church officially opened in 1846.

In addition to building churches, the German immigrants also gave the diocese its first Catholic school, which opened in 1836 in the basement of the Ely Street church. Although the Irish immigrants at St. Patrick's had planned for a school earlier in the decade, it didn't get off the ground until 1839.

"The German parishes are therefore the indisputable founders of the present Rochester diocesan school system," Father McNamara wrote. "Not until the days of Bishop (Bernard) McQuaid did the non-German congregations begin to overtake the German congregations in this respect."

In 1847, Buffalo became the see city of a new diocese encompassing Rochester, Auburn and much of the current Rochester diocese. At the same time, thousands of Irish were leaving their homeland when their primary food crop — potatoes — had been struck by a fungus blight the year before.

These impoverished Irish settled in great numbers in such cities as Rochester, Auburn, Elmira, Hornell, Dansville and the other towns and villages of the future diocese's 12 counties.

Although they claimed a common faith, cultural and language differences often spurred friction between the various Catholic immigrant groups, most notably the Irish and the Germans. In one town, for example, the Irish built a

separate church because of tension with the Germans who dominated the local Catholic parish.

Despite their differences, the immigrants did share a common desire to preserve their Catholic faith, Father McNamara pointed out.

"They instructed their children in Catholic teachings," the priest wrote. "They instructed and refreshed each other on Christian doctrine; we hear of laborers on the canals and railroads, who, as they worked, rehearsed each other on the answers of the penny catechism."

As the 1850s began, such steadfastness in faith became even more necessary to steel the immigrants to a growing phenomenon in the country — anti-Catholicism.

NEXT WEEK — 1850-1875: The Diocese of Rochester is born amid anti-Catholicism and civil strife.

Quadrant parents knock proposal to close schools

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our community," commented Jack Murphy, a member of the governance board's strategic planning committee, which drew up the schools' proposal.

Without consolidation, the quadrant would be forced to increase tuition for 1992-93 by 21 percent. But by closing the three schools, the quadrant can limit the tuition increase to 5.7 percent, while more efficiently using classroom space in the four remaining schools, officials noted.

The rationale offered by quadrant officials carried little weight with parents attending the meeting.

Some critics charged that the diocese was abandoning inner-city students to the public-school system.

Cora Jackson, a single mother of two children at St. Stanislaus, lamented the idea that her school was targeted for closing. She praised the attention she and her children had received from school officials and asked aloud how she could explain St. Stanislaus' demise to her offspring.

Addressing the board members, Jackson said: "I believe that you believe with God, all things are possible." Following a standing ovation, she led the crowd in a brief chant of, "Keep our schools open!"

Several parents said recent years' reorganization of quadrant schools had alienated them and discouraged belief that any quadrant schools would remain open in the future. One parent

from Christ the King parish asked if that school would be "next on the chopping block."

In particular, parents from St. Thomas the Apostle were vociferous in opposing the plan, so it came as no surprise that that parish served as the meeting ground for the proposal's opponents.

More than 300 people assembled there for a Nov. 22 meeting, in which Sullivan asked representatives from each quadrant parish to join committees focusing on spirituality, public relations, communications and finance. He said these committees would work to develop an alternate plan to "save" the quadrant's schools.

Sullivan also released a statement

calling for a "three- to five-year moratorium" on school closings in the quadrant. Such a moratorium would allow the quadrant to gain a "clearer perception of registration numbers, tuition and parish assessments," he said.

Volunteer workers at the meeting also distributed a "Catholic School Committee Questionnaire" in an effort to survey attitudes among those attending. Many of the questions dealt with potential effects the proposed closings would have on enrollment.

The questionnaire also proposed the possible establishment of a foundation to support Catholic schools. Sullivan said that his committee hoped to collect all the completed questionnaires by Dec. 1.

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