Anti-Catholicism marked immigrants' lives

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

In his 1968 history *The Diocese of Rochester*, Father Robert F. McNamara related an exchange between a Protestant and a Catholic in western New York sometime in the mid-1840s.

"When St. Mary's Church was building in Canandaigua, a local Protestant said to one of the Catholic builders, 'Well, this beats the devil, to see a Catholic church in Canandaigua.

"'Faith, you're right, sir,' replied the laborer. 'It's the *only* Church that can do the same!'"

Yet the laborer's witticism would have been lost on many Protestant citizens of this nation in the next decade. The 1850s would prove to be one of the toughest periods in U.S. history for immigrant Catholics, who were flooding the country's shores in ever-increasing numbers.

Seeds of mistrust

The 12 counties that currently make up the Diocese of Rochester had been incorporated into the Buffalo diocese in 1847. Most of the churches in the diocese were considered "Irish" or "German," but a storm cloud of prejudice would soon appear on the diocesan horizon to unite Catholics of all ethnic backgrounds in self-defense.

This turbulent cloud began to form long before the United States became a nation. Catholic and Protestant rulers had employed atrocity, persecution and intolerance against one another and their respective subjects ever since Catholic Europe was divided by the Protestant Reformation.

With varying degrees of intensity, Protestants, in particular, came to view the papacy as a vile, corrupt institution in which one man had usurped spiritual power that properly belonged to God, and temporal power that properly belonged to citizens.

Know-Nothing era

Many Protestant settlers in North America brought with them an ingrained distrust of the Catholic Church and its followers. Indeed, a number of them saw the founding of a *democratic* United States as a profoundly *Protestant* act. And it was an act they believed could be threatened only by immigrant Catholics who pledged allegiance to an authoritarian pope.

Ray Allen Billington wrote of such sentiments in his 1938 history of U.S. anti-Catholicism and anti-immigration movements, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860:*

"The preponderant number of papal adherents among the Irish and Germans coming to the United States made Americans wonder ... if their land was safe from Popery and fears were current that this immigration was a means by which Romish power could be transferred to America."

Such fears manifested themselves from time to time in incidents of anti-Catholic rioting in U.S. cities, and anti-Catholic preaching from the country's Protestant pulpits — and western New York saw its share of such abuses.

Secular newspapers in Rochester often published anti-Catholic diatribes, and Catholics in some neighborhoods occasionally suffered vandalism in their churches, and in even in their homes.

On one occasion, a Protestant mob — provoked to fury by a traveling anti-Catholic speaker known as "The Angel Gabriel" — wreaked considerable havoc on St. Ann's Church in Palmyra.

And on several other occasions, the parishioners of St. Mary's in Canandaigua felt compelled to "take precautions against the burning of their church building," Father McNamara wrote.

U.S. anti-Catholicism found its most organized expression in the form of the American Party. The party commonly was called the "Know-Nothing" party because its members often would reply, "I know nothing" in response to questions about their affiliation with it.

The Know-Nothings grew strong enough to field and elect dozens of political candidates in nationwide elections throughout the 1850s. Judge Nicholas Read, a Catholic farmer from Paddy Hill in the Town of Greece, became so concerned about possible Know-Nothing victories in the 1859 elections that he urged all "adopted citizens" to vote for *any* candidate — Democrat or Republican — who had

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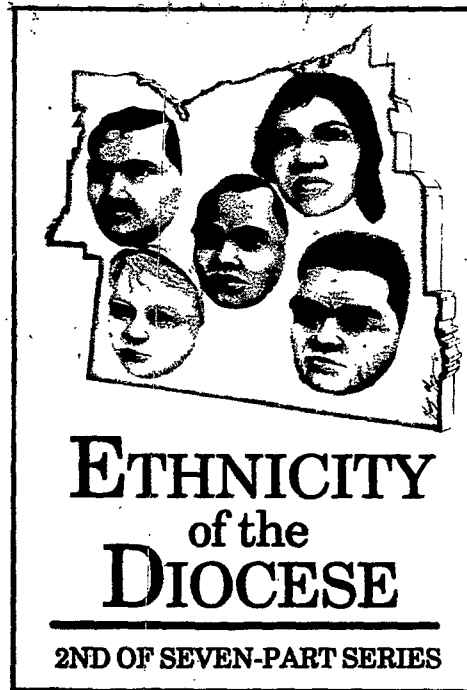
not been endorsed by the American Party.

Read's idea was picked up by the Catholic press in New York City, and the call to defeat Know-Nothingism at the ballot box almost succeeded. But a more compelling event soon sounded the first in a series of death knells for overt anti-Catholicism in the United States.

The Civil War

The War Between the States was the last major U.S. event to take place before the birth of the Diocese of Rochester. While the war did much to divide and embitter citizens against one another, it also gave immigrant Catholics a chance to show they were just as "American" as their Protestant brethren.

Indeed, a number of immigrant and first-generation Irish and German Catholics from what is now the Diocese of Rochester played a prominent role in the Union victory. Perhaps the most famous of area Irish Catholics who fought in the war was Rochester's Colonel Patrick O'Rorke, killed at the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863.

Yet, like their ethnic compatriots who rioted bloodily against conscription in New York City, many Irishmen in western New York resented the federal draft, especially because their meager means withheld from them the upper-class practice of hiring

substitutes to fight in their places.

Father McNamara recorded, however, that Bishop John Timon of Buffalo issued a pastoral letter in July of 1863, urging his flock to accept the draft law as it stood. "There was no rioting," Father McNamara wrote. "The people were resentful but not disorderly."

The general loyalty of Catholics to the Union's cause won them the respect that had been denied by years of pre-war anti-Catholicism.

"It is true that Catholic patriotism during the war did not destroy the fortress of American nativism," Father McNamara stated. "But it did make the first irreparable breach in its walls."

The diocese is born

In 1868, Bishop Bernard McQuaid was named to head the newly formed eight-county Diocese of Rochester. Known as a superior diplomat, the new bishop set the tone for dealings with his immigrant flock on the day he assumed his duties. Bishop McQuaid was installed as bishop in ceremonies at the "Irish" St. Patrick's Cathedral, but he made sure he then visited the "German" St. Joseph's Parish.

"The special purpose of this visit was to remind all that a bishop is shepherd of his entire flock, no matter what the nationality of its individual members," Father McNamara wrote.

That same year, Rochester's Our Lady of Victory Church was founded to serve French-speaking Catholics in the diocese. The small parish joined more than 60 other parishes and missions serving predominantly German and Irish immigrants within the diocesan borders, which encompassed — Monroe, Cayuga, Wayne, Ontario, Livingston, Tompkins, Seneca and Yates counties.

But by 1875, a new era in Catholic immigrant history was dawning in the diocese, as Italians and Poles began arriving in small numbers in the region. As his term of office continued, Bishop McQuaid would prove himself a deft hand at integrating these and other Catholic immigrants into their new nation.

NEXT WEEK: 1875-1900

Advent: Awaiting the revelation of God

By Father Thomas P. Mull
Guest contributor

On a recent nursing-home visit, I came upon an elderly gentleman holding a teddy bear and sitting alone in his room. I greeted the man with the teddy bear as I approached, but he did not respond.

I drew closer and looked at him. A small tear was creasing his cheek, and his eyes appeared swollen and red. Silently, I drew up a chair and sat next to him.

He said nothing for several minutes. Slowly, I noticed the teddy bear moving. Before too long, it sat on my knee. "He's all I've got," the man said.

I touched the teddy bear and smiled. "At least he's someone you can hold close," I replied spontaneously. The man looked at me. He said he had been watching out the window. "What were you watching for?" I asked.

He turned to the window and then back toward me. "God," he answered.

"God?" I asked him. "I want to go home where my friends are," he said. "I have waited so long. I cannot wait
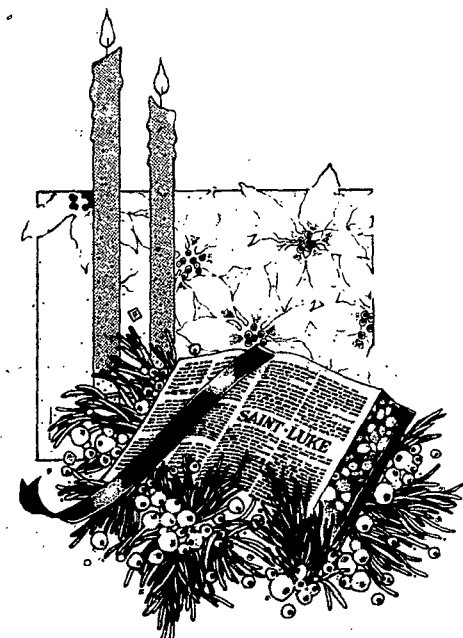
any longer. God is the only one who can help me."

His words hung in the air. I laughed and said: "You were looking for God and got me — Sorry!"

At first there was no response but, then, he turned toward me and said, "Well, you're better than nothing." I

smiled. Silence again filled the room. Once again, teddy sat on my knee. "I've waited so long," he said.

The days of Advent are filled with mystery and wonder. They busyness of this season seems to captivate our lives. There are twinkling lights, frosted windows, snow-covered trees. Nature seems to invite us to wonder from afar.

And we wait. We wait for Christmas Day. We wait for the end of school. We wait for that long-deserved vacation. We wait for the start of our journey home. We are all people who wait. Some, like my friend with the teddy bear, wait in pain. Others wait in great expectation. But we all wait.

The readings of this holy season remind us that we do not wait in isolation. Our ancestors of old waited and dreamed of what it would be like when the Messiah appeared. The mountains would be laid low, the valleys shout for joy. Cripples would walk, the blind would see. All creation would be made anew.

Our ancient mothers and fathers waited for God. Some waited in the

pain of persecution. Some waited in foreign lands, longing for Jerusalem. Some waited and died with their desires unfilled. Some just waited.

We, like our ancestors, wait for God. His second coming is our great expectation. These Advent days are not meant simply to call us to the past. They call us to a future reunion with God. They call us to appreciate the little revelations of this world as preparation for seeing God face to face.

We look out the window of the world and we wait for God. Nature reminds us of his power. Our faith tells us of his glory. Our hearts, warmed with Christmas joy and sharing, help us sense God's closeness. God is almost here, but not yet.

These Advent days call us to hold on to those we love — no matter how meager. They call us to look out our window and to search for God. They inform us that God is not going to be isolated from us, but will be as close as the one we love.

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