

Polish influx, conflicts mark the late 1800s

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

When Bishop Bernard McQuaid assumed control of the Rochester diocese in 1868, he found himself ruling over a community dominated by German and Irish Catholics. The major exception was the small group of French Catholics at Our Lady of Victory Parish.

That situation still existed through the 1870s. Irish Catholics continued to arrive — although in smaller numbers — while the influx of Germans to the City of Rochester actually increased, noted Father Robert McNamara in his book, *The Diocese of Rochester: 1868-1968*. By 1890, he estimated, half of the people living in Rochester were of German descent.

But new groups were beginning to arrive in increasing numbers.

By the early 1880s, Flemish Belgians began arriving, settling in Wayne, Ontario and Monroe counties. Bishop McQuaid had appointed Father Alphonse Notebaert to Our Lady of Victory in 1879 to serve the parish community. By the turn of the century, Flemish Belgians made up more than half of the parishioners at Our Lady of Victory, according to Father McNamara.

The Polish Influx

The first nationality beyond the German and Irish to move into the Rochester diocese in large numbers, however, were the Poles.

Poles had actually begun to arrive in the diocese in the 1850s, as part of the first wave of Polish immigration. Most of these early immigrants settled in the Midwest, or in the coal fields of Pennsylvania. A few of these immigrants did remain in Rochester, however.

Beginning in the early 1880s, however, there was a new wave of Polish immigrants, a number of whom settled in the Rochester diocese, noted Kathleen Urbanic, author of *Shoulder to Shoulder: Polish Americans in Rochester, N.Y., 1890-1990*.

One factor leading to their decision to settle in Rochester was the number of shoe and textile mills that provided ready jobs for the Poles, Urbanic explained in an interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

In addition, many of the Poles settling in Rochester were from German controlled areas of Poland, Urbanic observed. These Polish immigrants discovered that many of the businesses in Rochester were run by Germans, thus making communication easy. Further, the Poles found places to worship in the large number of German-speaking parishes in Rochester.

A church of their own

However, Urbanic said in her book,



A group of St. Stanislaus Kostka parishioners posed for this photo during a picnic around the turn of the century.

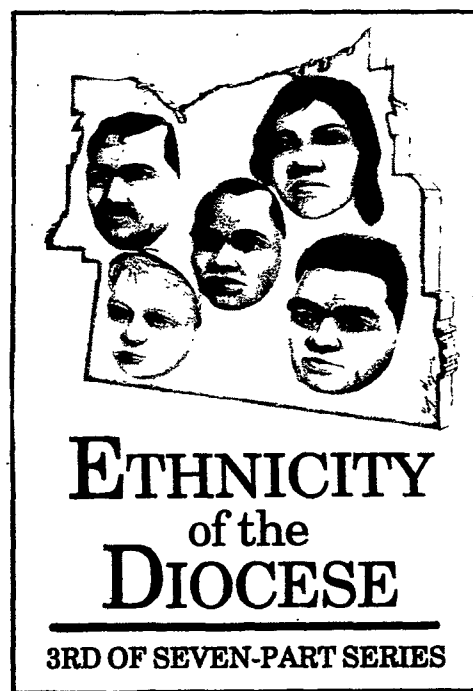
the Poles did not feel completely at ease in the German parishes. "Their homeland's bitter conflict with Germany," she wrote, "along with their attachment to Polish religious traditions, made the newcomers assimilation into the German settlement unlikely."

The Rochester Poles began to talk about forming their own parish, and in the interim, having a Polish priest come in from Buffalo to celebrate Mass and hear confessions. They formed the Society of St. Casimir in 1887 to pursue these ends, and on June 23, 1887, Bishop McQuaid granted permission for a Polish priest from Buffalo to serve the communities' spiritual needs.

Urbanic noted that Bishop McQuaid "had a philosophy about ethnic groups that they should be allowed to value their ethnic identity, but at the same time encouraged them to be assimilated into American culture."

Thus when the Society of St. Casimir began working toward establishing a Polish parish, Bishop McQuaid encouraged and supported them, Urbanic said. The bishop even contributed financially to help with the purchase of land for a church.

On May 7, 1888, the parish of St. Stanislaus Kostka was incorporated. And even as ground for the church was being broken on land purchased at Hudson Avenue and Norton Street, Bishop McQuaid contacted the Diocese of Poznan and Gneizno in Poland about obtaining a Polish priest for the



parish. He was put in touch with Teofil Szadzinski, who was then completing his theological studies at the American College of the Immaculate Conception in Louvain, Belgium.

Bishop McQuaid personally visited Szadzinski at Louvain, and when the seminarian agreed to come to the Rochester diocese, the bishop took charge of his training. Szadzinski was ordained by Bishop McQuaid in August, 1890. St. Stanislaus was completed in the fall of 1890. At that time, Urbanic noted in her book, the parish had 650 parishioners. By 1896, that number would grow to more than 2,000.

Outside the see city

While the Polish parish was developing in Rochester, the Poles in Elmira — then part of the Buffalo diocese — were also forming their own faith community. Like Rochester, Elmira had boasted Polish residents since the middle of the century. Those numbers increased in the 1870s, especially with Polish immigrants who originally settled in Pennsylvania to work in the coal fields moving north when labor disputes caused many of them to lose their jobs, Urbanic wrote.

Also like their Rochester counterparts, the Poles in Elmira grew dissatisfied with worshipping at a German parish — St. John's in Elmira.

Consequently, in 1890 the Poles of Elmira established St. Casimir Parish.

Another area with a growing Polish population was Auburn. That community would not have a church of its own until St. Hyacinth was created in 1908, but Father Szadzinski traveled to Auburn regularly to celebrate Mass in Polish at St. Alphonsus German Parish.

The path to schism

Despite positive actions on the part of Bishop McQuaid and the diocese, however, the local Polish community became involved in a national dispute that would lead to the only schism in the Catholic Church in the United States, Urbanic noted.

The roots of that conflict was Polish nationalism. In Poland, faith and patriotism were intertwined, Urbanic explained in her book. In the United States, however, some Polish nationalists saw attempts by bishops to encourage assimilation into American society as forces that would undermine Poles' sense of nationalism.

One group promoting these nationalistic goals was the Polish National Alliance. A Rochester chapter of the alliance formed in 1893.

The chapter — called the "Sons of the Polish Crown" — attracted the disapproval of Father Szadzinski because he was aware of the conflict surrounding the national group, and because the local group was separate from the parish and included non-Catholics, Urbanic wrote. He forbade members of his parish to be members of the organization, splitting the parish, and even families, she noted.

In the next few years, two more local chapters of the alliance formed, leading to further divisions in the Polish community. Members of these groups petitioned Bishop McQuaid — then to Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore — to have Father Szadzinski removed from the parish. Those requests were denied.

On a national level, the rift between

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