

Italians flocked to diocese at turn of century

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

As the Diocese of Rochester entered the 20th century, it continued to experience sustained and substantial growth through immigration, Father Robert McNamara noted in his book *The Diocese of Rochester: 1868-1968*.

In 1896, the region's Catholic population was 80,000, Father McNamara observed. By 1910, the Catholic population had grown to approximately 125,000. Some of the increase, however, came through the incorporation of four Southern Tier counties into the Rochester see in late 1896, he noted.

The stream of immigrants from Ireland and Germany continued to decline. The flow of Belgian, Flemish and Dutch immigrants was small but steady, with most such settlers in the City of Rochester joining Our Lady of Victory Parish. And when St. Gregory's in Marion was established in 1914 as a mission church, its population, too, was largely Flemish and Dutch.

Meanwhile, the Poles continued to arrive in large numbers. Even with the division of St. Stanislaus when St. Casimir's Polish National Church formed 1907 through a schism (split) in the church, Rochester's Polish-Catholic population increased so greatly that by 1928 a second Polish parish, St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, was created. And in Auburn, St. Hyacinth was established in 1908 to meet the needs of the Poles there.

The 'catacomb' church

But by far the most significant influx of immigrants in the first quarter of the 20th century came from Italy.

Father McNamara records that Domenico Sturla, the first known Italian immigrant living in the City of Rochester, actually had been listed in the city directory in 1868. By 1875, 30 Italians were living in Monroe County. That number increased to 516 in 1890, 1,000 in 1893, and grew rapidly thereafter.

Beginning in 1898, an Italian Mass was celebrated in a chapel at St. Patrick's Cathedral. In 1906, St. Anthony of Padua Parish was established to meet the needs of Italians on the west side of the Genesee River. A



This illustration was part of a 1976 display honoring immigrants at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Auburn.

chapel for Italians on the river's east side was set up in 1904 in the basement of Corpus Christi Church. The congregation that met there formed Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish in 1912.

The Italian population on Rochester's east side continued to grow, spreading out from the Mount Carmel area over the city line into Irondequoit. The area around the corner of Goodman and Norton streets became known as "Goats Hill" because of the number of goats maintained by neighborhood residents.

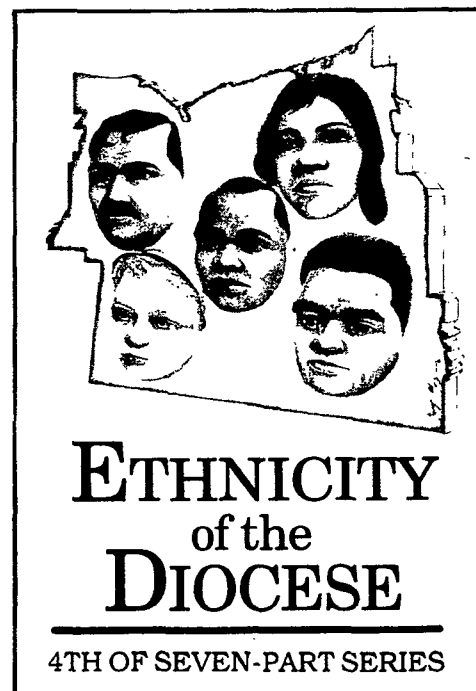
In 1914, the then Bishop Thomas F. Hickey (who had succeeded to ordinary of the Rochester see upon Bishop Bernard McQuaid's death in 1909), authorized the construction of a chapel in the Goats Hill neighborhood.

The parishioners quickly raised money to begin the project, but were unable to come up with enough to raise the structure beyond the basement level. This basement was roofed over, and was named St. Agnes Chapel. But as Father McNamara noted in his 1967 history of Annunciation Parish, "Because it was mostly underground, the chapel got the nickname 'The Catacomb Church.'" When the upper structure of the church was completed in 1923, the building was renamed the Chapel — later, the Church — of the Annunciation.

Across the diocese

The see city of Rochester was not alone in attracting Italian immigrants. The first Italians arrived in Clyde around 1885 and in Geneva in 1890. The salt mines at Retsof attracted a number of Italian workers, and St. Lucy's Chapel — a mission church — was opened for them in 1914.

The Italian population in Auburn became large enough to support their



own parish, and St. Francis of Assisi was formed in 1908. St. Anthony of Padua Parish in Elmira was established in 1911 to meet the needs of Italians there, and the Italians of Mount Morris created Church of the Assumption in 1914.

By 1914, Father McNamara's diocesan history observes, "there was scarcely a city or town in the whole diocese in which Italians did not soon outnumber the other foreign-born inhabitants and compose an impressive block of the local population."

Nevertheless, this population block frequently became the target of prejudice, from both Catholics and non-Catholics across the country. In his book, *Catholic America*, John Cogley pointed out that Italians were often uneducated farm workers who took on menial jobs and were segregated in slums. Further, he noted, their "casual" attitudes toward priests and church rules, and their demon-

strative style of worship, offended the U.S. church's German — and especially Irish — leaders. As a result, he wrote, Italians were "treated as a people apart."

Locally, Father McNamara observed, Italians also faced prejudice. "Even Catholics, whose own parents had encountered unfriendliness on their arrival in the United States, often showed a like uncharity towards the poor newcomers," he wrote.

Despite this prejudice, Father McNamara observed, Italians played a significant role in defending their new nation during World War I. A total of 609 servicemen from Monroe County died in the war, he noted. Of that number 236 were Catholic — and 43 of them Italian.

Rochester's Polish immigrants also participated in the war in large numbers. More than 250 joined the American contingent of the Polish army and 700 more served in the U.S. military, according to Kathleen Urbanic's book, *Shoulder to Shoulder: Polish Americans in Rochester, N.Y., 1890-1990*. About 25 of these soldiers died, she estimated.

Other nationalities

Although Italians were the most significant immigrant group in terms of numbers between 1900 and 1925, other groups were arriving in the diocese in substantial numbers, Father McNamara reported. Two of those groups were able to form churches of their own during this period.

Eastern-Rite Catholics from the Ukraine began settling in the Rochester diocese during the last two decades of the 19th century, with the first Ukrainians in the City of Rochester arriving in 1903. Their number swelled quickly, and by 1910 the city's first Ukrainian parish, St. Josaphat's, opened.

Lithuanians, too, joined the immigrant stream before the turn of the century, and by 1906, their numbers had increased enough to consider forming their own parish. The community began to hold Masses at Holy Redeemer Church while raising funds to build a church. Finally, St. George's Lithuanian Church was dedicated in 1910.

COMING UP JAN. 9: 1925-50.

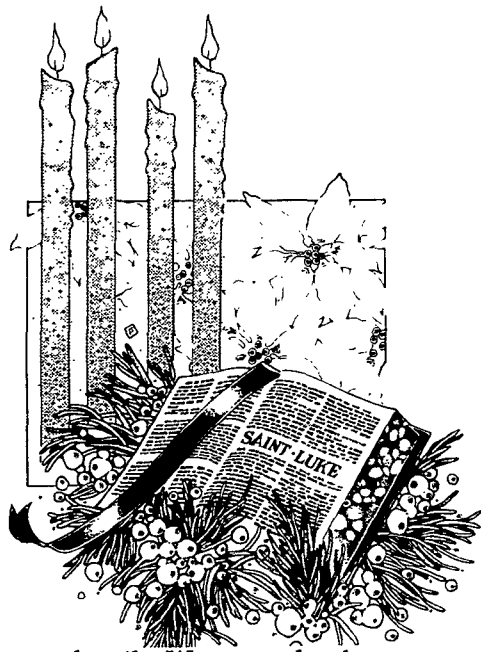
Advent is a season for active waiting and anticipation

By James and Donna Fitch
Guest contributors

The Advent season is filled with many images and symbols. It's often a challenge for us, as busy Christians, to find the time to reflect on those dimensions of Advent. Waiting and watching during Advent is something that we have been reflecting on lately.

We have all experienced times of waiting. During Advent we are called to examine how we wait. Our season's readings give us clues about the kind of special waiting we are called to as Advent people. We are told "be on guard" and "to be on watch." The word further challenges us to "Rejoice in the Lord always!" Scripture helps to shape our waiting.

During the past several days, we have examined how it is that we, and others, wait. While at the mall recently, we were waiting for a store to open with a group of people. We were all just standing around, detached and disengaged from one another. Some people seemed to be experiencing frustration, almost anger. Others seemed distant and removed, anxious and al-



most hostile. We seemed to have an attitude of indifference toward one another.

Think of the waiting experiences you are involved with now and then. Perhaps it's waiting for family news; for the dust to settle in work-related reorganization; for test results; or for someone in surgery.

Perhaps it's waiting to find employment; to celebrate marriage; or to have a baby. Waiting is something that we all do — maybe even more often than we realize. We wait in traffic and grocery lines. We wait for appointments or business transactions.

Advent is a time for us to examine how we wait as Christians. It is a waiting, not only to celebrate Jesus' birth, but to examine how we anticipate and await Jesus' coming in glory. This is a particular sort of waiting.

The most positive manner of anticipation we saw recently was how neighborhood kids waited for the school bus. While observing them, we saw a sense of anticipation, conversation and communication. We also saw laughter and fun. In addition to experiencing the sense of joy as friends appeared from different pathways, the children displayed care and concern for each other. It was an active, participatory waiting. And there was a sense of urgency as the bus approached. The kids then quickly prepared to board the bus and were off.

What of us? How is it that we wait? As Christians we are to be active and

participatory in our waiting. We are not to just sit back, like observers at a sporting event, but be involved in spreading the good news. We are supposed to anticipate the possibility of God bursting forth into our everyday lives at any moment.

Like the kids, we should anticipate God's presence in our prayer and in our relationships. We should look for God's presence in each and every person that we come in contact with whether at home, at school, at work or anywhere. We need to anticipate God's presence wherever we are, and especially in those situations where we think God might not be easily found.

We should, as we say each time we gather around the Lord's table, "... wait in joyful hope for the coming of the Lord."

Happy Advent. Prepare ... wait. Jesus is coming. May our Advent-Christmas-Epiphany prayer draw us closer to Jesus, transforming us more and more into his image.

The authors are members of the Diocesan Liturgical Commission.