

# In spite of quotas, ethnic groups increase

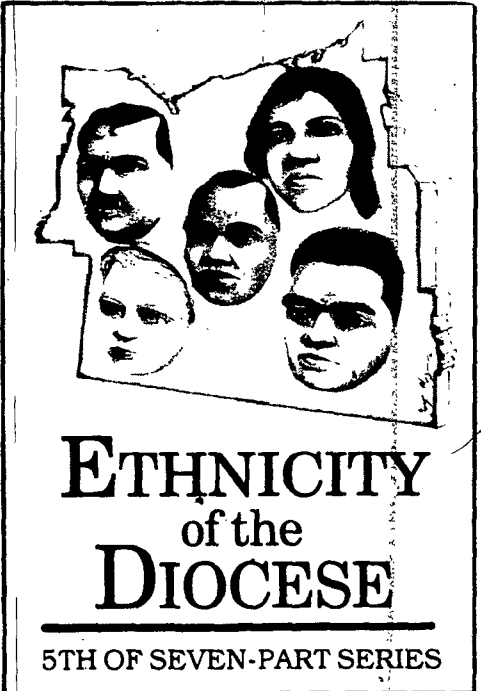
By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

By 1925, the immigrant stream to Rochester and the rest of the United States was slowing — albeit under pressure.

A series of federal quota bills — culminating with the Reed-Johnson Act of 1924 — increasingly restricted the flow of immigrants. Especially affected were immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, noted Father James Hennessey, SJ, in his book *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States*.

The quota bills had not only ethnic, but also religious overtones, Father Hennessey said. The country was experiencing a wave of anti-Catholicism in the 1920s, with such groups as the Ku Klux Klan voicing fears that the country would become Catholic through immigration.

Meanwhile, in the church, Father Hennessey wrote, "energies previously devoted to coping with religious needs of immigrants were diverted to consolidating and stabilizing institutional structures."



## Subsiding flow

In Rochester, the tide of immigration likewise began to subside in the 1920s, noted Kathleen Urbanic in her book, *Shoulder to Shoulder: Polish Americans in Rochester, NY, 1890-1990*.

Urbanic pointed out that of the city's 300,000 people in the 1920s, some 70,000 were immigrants. The Germans and Irish, she wrote, "had shared in the city's life of nearly a century." Three of the largest immigrant groups from the early years of the 20th century — the Italians, Poles and Ukrainians — "were entering their second generation in local neighborhoods and had proven their worth as hard-working members of the city's labor force," she observed.

Nevertheless, new parishes were being formed to meet the needs of the diocese's ethnic groups.

The Italian population continued to grow — both from immigration and from children of Italian descent. As a result, Italians were becoming — in terms of numbers — the dominant ethnic group in the diocese, noted Father Robert McNamara in his book, *The Diocese of Rochester, 1868-1968*. In 1928 alone, he observed, "one-tenth of the Catholics born in the City of Rochester were born into families of par-



File photo  
Father John M. Merklinger stands alongside a bus donated in 1941 by C.P. Ward to St. Francis of Assisi Church in Rochester. The bus enabled the parish priests to carry out their programs to younger people.

ishioners of Mt. Carmel Parish" — an Italian parish.

To meet this increase in the city, four Italian mission churches were created in a two-year span: Ss. Francis of Assisi and Philip Neri in 1929; and Our Lady of Sorrows and Church of the Most Precious Blood in 1930.

Of those mission churches, Most Precious Blood (1934), St. Francis of Assisi (1935) and St. Philip Neri (1938) were made parishes. Our Lady of Sorrows closed in 1938, Father McNamara reported, because "Italian Catholics had largely displaced the German Catholics in the old German parish of St. Francis Xavier," and thus that parish met the needs of Italians in the area around Bay Street.

The Polish community in the diocese likewise continued to grow, although at a slower rate than earlier in the 20th century.

In 1928, the Polish neighborhood around St. Stanislaus Church had continued to expand, spilling over to the south and east of that parish's old boundaries. Some of the Poles in these new areas had to walk a half mile to get to church, or had begun attending Holy Redeemer German Church.

Finally, a group of St. Stanislaus parishioners from these new areas approached then-Bishop of Rochester Thomas F. Hickey in 1927, requesting the formation of a second parish for Poles. As a result, the Parish of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus was formed in Sept., 1927. The Polish Conventual Franciscans assumed responsibility for the parish.

Meanwhile, Poles from Pennsylvania continued to move into the Southern Tier, Father McNamara noted. In Steuben County, the mission parish of St. Stanislaus was opened in Bradford in 1926. The parish was staffed by Franciscans until 1935, when diocesan priests began serving there.

Tioga County also experienced an influx of Poles from Pennsylvania. Many of these Poles settled in the Catocton region, and in 1931 a mission church, St. Francis, was opened.

Father McNamara observed that the only other "national" church formed in the 1920s was St. Nicholas the Wonderworker Greek Melkite Parish, which opened in 1927 to serve the small community of Syrian Catholics in Rochester. Although now part of Melkite Eparchy of Newton, Mass., the parish was part of the Diocese of Rochester from the time of its creation until 1966 because there were no Melkite bishops in the United States.

## The Depression hits

The Stock Market crash of 1929, resulting in the Great Depression that lasted well into the 1930s, caused problems for many of the parishes in the diocese — both ethnic and otherwise, Father McNamara observed. The Depression forced parishes to curtail expansion and construction projects.

Some parishes that had built new buildings just prior to the Depression, however, suffered financially during the 1930s. And many of these parishes were the ethnic parishes that had recently sprung up or had been expanding due to increasing numbers of parishioners.

Mount Carmel Parish, for example, began building a new church just prior to the stock market crash. The building was completed in 1930.

In his history of Mt. Carmel Parish, Father Lawrence Palumbus noted that the parish was unable to reduce the principle on the loan taken out to finance construction, but "through the generosity of the people and the efforts of the pastor, along with the ever present help of God, the parish did not go further into debt."

In response to the economic problems, several German parishes in Rochester developed credit unions in conjunction with the American Central Verein. The credit unions were established to help parishioners borrow money without fear of the high rates of interest being charged by loan companies, Fr. McNamara wrote.

The first local parish credit union, was opened at Holy Family in 1937. Four other credit unions formed in primarily German parishes over the next three years: St. Andrew's in 1938; Our Lady of Perpetual Help and Holy Redeemer in 1939; and Ss. Peter and Paul in 1940.

Although only Holy Family's credit union has survived, Father McNamara noted that at the time that they were formed, "The credit unions had done a valuable service in a time of genuine need."

## The war years

As they had during the First World

War, ethnic Catholics responded to the call to duty in World War II. In particular, Urbanic observed, Rochester's Poles were caught up in the war effort after Poland was invaded by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Before the United States entered the war in 1941, the Poles organized relief campaigns.

After the United States entered the war, Urbanic reported, nearly 1,000 men from the Rochester Polish community enlisted — approximately 700 from St. Stanislaus Church. In Elmira, 316 members from St. Casimir's Parish likewise served in the armed forces, according to Father Raymond Wisniewski in his history of the parish, *Elmira's Poles: St. Casimir's Century of Service*.

## Post war changes

When World War II ended in 1945, Rochester's ethnic communities responded to relief efforts, Father McNamara noted.

By February, 1948, the Rosary Society of Holy Family had sent 200 packages to Germany. Parishioners of St. George's Lithuanian Parish collected used clothing for Lithuanian war victims.

Father McNamara wrote that — by 1949 — members of the German Catholic Kolping Society had shipped 1,000 packages of relief supplies to two German dioceses.

The largest of the relief efforts, however, was for Italy, Father McNamara said. In 1944-45, for example, Father Charles Azzi, pastor of Mt. Carmel Parish, organized clothes-for-Italy campaigns, collecting 230,000 pounds of clothing.

Meanwhile, displaced people began to arrive in the diocese after the war once federal quota laws were relaxed. A number of Ukrainians settled in the diocese, including 50 in Auburn around 1948. Large numbers of Poles were also admitted to the diocese, with the largest single batch (48) settling near Weedsport. And by far the largest ethnic group coming to the diocese over those years was 300 Lithuanians.

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