

Minority groups made mark in 1950s, '60s

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Diocesan history from 1950-1975 was bracketed by the arrival of refugees from Europe and from Southeast Asia.

Between these waves of foreign immigration, migrations of such U.S. citizens as Puerto Ricans and African-Americans to the nation's Northeast also dramatically altered the ethnic character of several diocesan parishes.

The Europeans

Father Robert F. McNamara's book *The Diocese of Rochester — 1868-1968* notes that a refugee-relief bill passed by Congress in 1953 enabled European Catholics of various ethnic backgrounds to settle alongside native-born Catholic brethren in the diocese.

The Rochester Chapter of the American Committee on Italian Immigration helped to settle a number of Italian Catholics in the area in the early 1950s. Meanwhile, the clergy of St. George's Parish in Rochester worked on behalf of about 400 Lithuanian exiles who had left their Soviet-dominated homeland to live in the diocese.

Hungarian Catholics had a presence in the diocese since the 1800s, but their numbers here increased considerably after both world wars. In 1953, Hungarians began gathering at St. Patrick's Church in Rochester to celebrate their national feast days with a Mass and social hour, Father McNamara recorded.

The ill-fated Hungarian uprising of 1956 ended with Soviet tanks rolling through the streets of Budapest and thousands of Hungarians fleeing to Western Europe. Rochester Catholic Charities established the Emergency Fund for Hungarian Refugees, and helped resettle 50 families throughout the diocese's 12 counties.

The American Migrants

The Diocese of Rochester proved attractive in the '50s not only to refugees from Europe, but also to black migrants from the southern United States and to Puerto Ricans from the U.S. Caribbean commonwealth.

While most of the African-Americans did not belong to the Catholic Church, Catholicism was nearly a birthright for most of the newly arrived Puerto Ricans. By the end of the 1950s, almost 5,000 had settled in Rochester, along with hundreds more in Geneva and Newark.

One of the ways the diocese responded to this influx of Spanish-speaking Catholics was by offering special Masses at such sites as Rochester's St. Joseph's House of Hospitality. During such liturgical celebrations, the faithful were treated to sermons in their native tongue.

Father McNamara's book notes that



Hispanics — and the African-Americans pictured in this 1964 photo from Rochester's St. Bridget's Parish — changed the ethnic makeup of several diocesan parishes in the decades following World War II.

in Geneva, the Rosary Society of St. Francis' DeSales Church gave a Christmas party for Hispanic children in 1956. "A surprise visitor to the party was Sr. Casimiro Gonzalez Correa, Rochester-based field representative of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico," he wrote.

Cuban refugees and Mexican migrants joined the diocese's Spanish-speaking population in the mid-1960s, adding to the growing number of Hispanic Catholics, who would number more than 20,000 by the next decade.

In 1965, diocesan Hispanics inaugurated the Cursillo movement, a weekend spiritual renewal that originated in Spain. An assistant pastor at Rochester St. Bridget's Church, Father Roger Baglin, was involved with the Cursillo movement at the time, and through it became acquainted with the situation of Hispanic Catholics in the diocese.

Eventually, Father Baglin approached Bishop Fulton J. Sheen with documentation on the "Latin situation," as the then-*Courier-Journal* called it at the time, and the bishop appointed the priest to head the Spanish Apostolate in 1967.

Since that time, the apostolate — currently located next to Rochester's St. Michael's Church on North Clinton Avenue — has worked to serve the

great migrations that followed World War II. As early as 1937, black children were attending such Catholic schools as Immaculate Conception in Rochester.

The diocese also produced two notable black Catholic vocations in the 1950s and '60s. Brother Ralph J. Carpenter took his perpetual vows with the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in 1951, and Father Charles Hall, SSJ, an Aquinas Institute graduate, was ordained in 1960.

Civil-rights activism in the 1950s and '60s helped create the Catholic Interracial Council of Rochester in 1960. The CIC sponsored such events as interracial Masses and Communion breakfasts, and presented panel discussions on racial questions.

But the frustrations of the civil-rights era led such Rochester parishes as St. Bridget, St. Lucy and St. Francis Xavier to witness the turmoil that swept the city in the 1964 riots. "Although many commercial properties were damaged, fortunately church property did not suffer," Father McNamara recorded.

By the end of the 1960s, many white Catholics had joined other whites moving from the cities to suburban areas of the diocese, where several new parishes were formed to serve them. Consequently, many urban parishes, particularly in Rochester, declined in membership or saw the character of their congregations change from German, Irish, Polish or Italian heritage to Hispanic or African-American.

And, to this day, such urban parishes as Our Lady of Perpetual Help are marked by a mixed population of older white and younger black or Hispanic families.

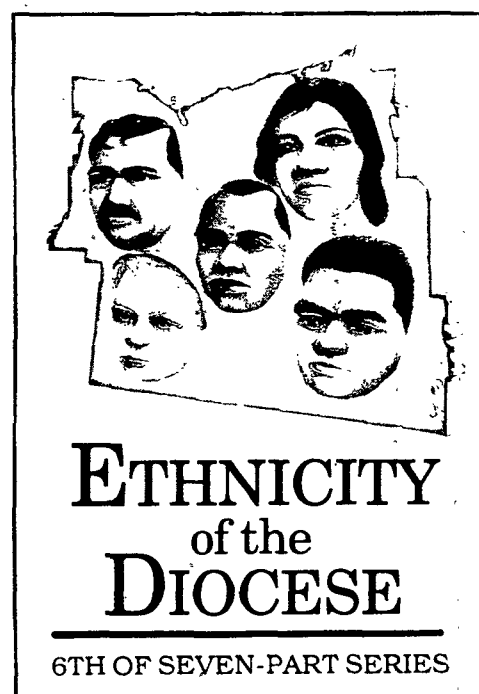
Father McNamara also noted that smaller groups of Filipinos and Ukrainians also made their way to the diocese in the 1950s, '60s and early '70s.

The Asians

The fall of South Vietnam's capital, Saigon, in the spring of 1975 helped form the next wave of Catholics seeking a new life in the diocese. A May, 1975, edition of the then-*Courier-Journal* related the efforts of a Catholic Hungarian exile from the 1950s who was advocating hospitality toward the coming surge of refugees.

"I think that the Vietnamese will make a good addition to our society," said Peter Steiner, yesterday's Hungarian refugee and today's American citizen," the *Courier* reported.

Next Week: 1975 to the Present



needs of Spanish-speaking Catholics by encouraging cultural celebrations, historical awareness and liturgical life.

African-American Catholics, while fewer in number than the Puerto Ricans, nonetheless had established a presence in the diocese prior to the

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