

Priest revealed lifelong secret in final days

By Father Robert F. McNamara
Guest contributor

A new pastor arrived at Rochester's Church of Ss. Peter and Paul on Sept. 28, 1865. He would remain pastor of this second largest of the city's German-language parishes until his death, just 85 years ago, in 1907.

German-speaking, of course, he was also German-born — in fact, a recent immigrant. But he bore a curiously un-German name, Francis Sinclair. How he came by this Franco-Scottish surname would surface only in his last days. While his origins need further clarification, what we do know about him makes a fascinating, almost operatic scenario.

According to his own statement, Father Francis Henry Sinclair was born on Jan. 14, 1838, in Schwerin, a small but ancient city near Hamburg in northern Germany. Raised a fervent Catholic in a strongly Lutheran land, Francis felt called to be a missionary priest. In 1856, therefore, he matriculated in Rome's great missionary seminary, the College of Propaganda Fide.

He was ordained a priest in Rome on May 21, 1864, and at the same time won the academic degree of doctor of theology. (Hence Rochesterians would later refer to him as "Dr. Sinclair.")

When he first elected a missionary career, Francis hoped to be sent to China. It was the Roman superiors, however, who had the last word on mission assignments of Propaganda College graduates. Not long before his priestly ordination, these superiors received an urgent plea for a German-speaking priest from Bishop John Timon of Buffalo.

As a result, young Father Sinclair was posted, not to the Far East but to what Bishop Timon used to call the "Near West" — western New York. Arriving in Buffalo in the late summer of 1864, the young German priest spent the next few months familiarizing himself with American church ways and American English.

Though still small in population, Ss. Peter and Paul Parish was not an easy pastoral station for an experienced priest, much less for a 27-year-old novice. In the first place, the erection of the first church in 1843 — its original location was at Maple and King Streets — had been marred by controversy. Then, from 1851-62, a contentious minority of the parishioners mounted a campaign to achieve lay control of the parish finances.

By 1865, however, the parochial tempest had subsided. Nevertheless, according to Dr. Sinclair, the bishop of Buffalo — when he gave him his credentials as pastor of Ss. Peter and Paul — told him that if there were another such outbreak among the parishioners, he should declare that the interdicts were once more in effect, and then leave the parish immediately and return to Buffalo.

Bishop Timon's warning proved to be unnecessary. The people of Ss. Peter and Paul's were tired of parochial war. More importantly, their new pastor proved to be a gentle man: wise, indeed, beyond his years.

After 1860, the original St. Peter's church building served as the parochial schoolhouse. A frame building, it burned down in 1867. Father Sinclair set about at once to build a larger brick building to replace it. Unfortunately, the new schoolhouse, erected perhaps too speedily, proved to be poorly constructed.

During a fundraising dinner held in the school's upper story on Jan. 6, 1869, the floor caved in under the weight of



Father Francis Sinclair served as pastor of Rochester's Ss. Peter and Paul Church from 1865-1907.

the 300 diners. Many fell into that frightful chasm; dozens were injured and eight killed. Although shocked beyond words, the pastor quickly directed the rescue of the bewildered victims and the removal of the casualties to his rectory.

Throughout his career, nonetheless, Sinclair showed himself an enlightened, studious and well-informed educator. He is said to have been the first German-language pastor in Rochester to authorize the use of English as well as German in parochial school instruction. He also became the first of the local German pastors to require that his pupils take the New York State Regents examinations.

Although Bishop John Timon was Father Sinclair's superior for only a couple of years, he was evidently pleased with the priest. Bishop Timon died in 1867; the diocese of Rochester was sliced off the diocese of Buffalo in 1868, and Bernard J. McQuaid was consecrated its first bishop. Bishop McQuaid, too, quickly saw that the youthful Sinclair stood out among his German diocesan priests.

In 1907, Francis Sinclair built the little Star of the Sea Chapel on Grandview Beach to accommodate Catholics who summered on Lake Ontario. On a Sunday in September, 1907, he traveled out to the lakeside to say the last summer Mass of the year in this chapel. It had already been a busy day. He had offered early Mass in the parish church.

Then, in the afternoon, he set out for the Erie Station to catch a train for Dansville, where he had been invited to participate in the Forty Hours' Devotion. As he hurried over Exchange Street he was felled by a fatal heart attack. The outpouring of his parishioners for the funeral solemnities of their 69-year-old pastor amply demonstrated the affection in which they had come to hold him. The chief beneficiaries of his will were the parish itself and the School Sisters of Notre Dame, whom he held in the highest regard.

But what about that name, Sinclair? Father Francis, during his 42 years as pastor, had chosen to offer no public explanation. It so happened, however, that just a week before his death he gave a confidential account of his early

background to his friend (and successor-to-be), Father J. Emil Gefell (1870-1959). Father Gefell ultimately passed the story on to the School Sisters of Notre Dame; also to the present writer, and diocesan historian.

The narrative that I recount is not without its ambiguities. Such puzzles are almost inevitable in oral history, but it is also possible that Father Sinclair edited somewhat his autobiographical narrative.

The pastor told Gefell that he had grown up in the strongly Catholic household of one Herr Grueder, an artist of Schwerin, whom he always presumed to be his father. In 1856, however, when Francis was about to leave for the Roman Seminary, Grueder's eldest son, Father Hermann Grueder, gave him some startling information. (In 1869, Pope Pius IX would appoint this priest the first perfect apostolic of Denmark.)

You believe that you are a Grueder and go by that name, said Father Her-



Baron Gottlieb von Schroeter, who was Father Sinclair's real father, died on Dec. 10, 1878.

mann. You are not. Your father is Baron Gottlieb von Schroeter. Many years ago this artist-aristocrat from Mecklenburg-Schwerin went to Rome to further his education in painting, leaving behind a woman who had borne him a child. He departed a Lutheran, but while in Rome he became a convert to Catholicism. When he returned at length to Germany and announced the conversion to his Lutheran spouse (or consort), she made off for good, taking their small son. That child was you.

Ardent in his new-found faith, Father Hermann continued, von Schroeter naturally wanted his son to be raised a Catholic. He approached my father, whom he had met in Roman art circles, and asked his assistance in "kidnapping" you and getting you baptized. The abduction succeeded, and you were baptized in Lueneburg, south of Hamburg. Your father, who had become an enthusiastic member of the Franciscan Third Order, chose for you the Christian name Francis, after St. Francis of Assisi; and to hide your identity, he gave you the surname St. Clair (or Sinclair) in memory of St. Clare of Assisi.

My father agreed to raise you as a foster-son. Your own father then returned to Rome, where he still lives dividing his time between painting and working for church causes. When you get to Rome he will pay you a visit.

The Baron did call on his son at Propaganda College, and saw him on more than one occasion during his Roman stay. He was present at Francis' ordination in 1864 and attended his first Mass. It is doubtful that priest and parent became particularly intimate, and when Sinclair left for Buffalo, their parting was probably for good, since von Schroeter died on Dec. 10, 1878.

But the young missionary, detouring via Mecklenburg on his journey to America, made a point of looking up his blood mother. Still a Lutheran and still evidently hurting, when she beheld her son a Catholic priest, she simply turned on her heel and walked away. Sinclair always remained close to the Grueders, however, and he later persuaded his foster-sister Wilhelmina to settle in Rochester.

We know more about Baron von Schroeter from earlier American sources. Obviously desirous of promoting the Catholic faith, he had taken an active part, between 1845-48, in the establishment of Marienstadt, or St. Mary's, a colony of German Catholic immigrants laid out in the rugged wilderness of Elk County, Pennsylvania. (Today St. Mary's is a village with a population of 7,000.)

In 1848, however, Baron von Schroeter had a falling out with the business managers of St. Mary's, and left the colony for good. Neither the managers, nor the Redemptorist Fathers who had been participants in the venture, nor Mother (now Blessed) Maria Theresa Gerhardinger, who had brought her School Sisters over from Germany, were unhappy to have him depart. All agreed that he was devout and zealous, but he had — to say the least — no business sense, and was too erratic to be relied on.

Fortunately, the son did not much resemble his baronial father. Dr. Francis von Schroeter-Sinclair was zealous, too; but a man of superb common sense. The melodramatic aspects of his childhood by no means prevented him from becoming one of the outstanding priests in the history of the Rochester diocese.

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