

# Church, social tides helped shape diocesan history

By Father Robert H. McNamara  
Guest contributor

An occasion such as the Diocese of Rochester's observation of its 125th birthday demands some acknowledgement of the era's triumphs and trials.

But what is the best approach?

I believe a "satellite overview" will serve best.

I am impressed by the outer-space vistas that present-day weather satellites afford us. They show not only the highs and lows of a given area, but also their relation to the highs and lows around the country and around the world. It is important to remember, when we focus on the events in one local church, that these developments are influenced by the same spiritual "jet streams" that affect every other local church on earth. No diocese is an island.

My thesis is simple and uncontested. As America is a "nation of immigrants," so the Diocese of Rochester is — by and large — a diocese of immigrants. Its original settlers came from many nations, but their eventual assimilation to American folkways and to American Catholicism was a forgone conclusion. For the earlier immigrant peoples, at least, World War II marked the climax of our "naturalization." Twenty years later we Americanized Catholics would discern a watershed of our Catholicism in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

When Bernard J. McQuaid came to Rochester in 1868 as its pioneer bishop, he was well aware that his task would be to shepherd countless immigrants and their offspring. Initially, these "adopted Americans" hailed principally from Ireland and Germany, but there were likewise some from the Low Countries and from French Canada. The diocese subsequently would welcome Poles, Lithuanians, and Greek-rite Ukrainians from Eastern Europe; Eastern-rite Catholics from the Middle East; Portuguese from the Atlantic Islands; and thousands upon thousands of Italians.

What were these emigrés like? Language group differed from language group, of course, and each, in turn, often was further divided by provincial origins. The immigrants differed also in destinations. Some chose the cities, to be nearer to their fellow countrymen. Others chose rural districts, usually ensuring quicker assimilation, but also making pastoral care more difficult. In general, they were wholesomely poor, more or less firm in hereditary faith, and convinced they could achieve a better quality of life in the "land of the free and the home of the brave."



Pioneering Bishop Bernard J. McQuaid came to Rochester in 1868.

File photo

Let me illustrate this with a story of the members of one diocesan congregation during the period of 1890-1910. They were not urban but rural; indeed, their church, St. Andrew in Dundee, was not even a parish church, but a small mission of Penn Yan's St. Michael Parish. Most of the parishioners were Irish, so there was no linguistic problem. Catholics isolated in our "Protestant" counties and deprived of daily pastoral attention often drifted away from their baptismal faith. Not so, the people of St. Andrew's.

In 1984 the late Mrs. Rose Tenbrook Hommel, then in her 90s, recounted her parish recollections to Father William C. Michatek, St. Michael's current pastor.

She and her family were parishioners of the Dundee mission at the turn of the century. The congregation had only 30 or 40 members — many of whom lived outside the village of Dundee. Rose's father worked for the railroad, and their home was in Starkey, N.Y. So when the family went to Sunday Mass in Dundee,

the Tenbrooks had to walk the four dusty miles on foot.

Even so, they did not have Mass at the mission every Sunday. Due to the priest shortage, Father Martin Hendrick, then-pastor of St. Michael's, was able to serve them only one Sunday a month. On Mass weekends he would make the 13-mile trip by horse and buggy (by train in bad weather) on Saturday and stay overnight with Timothy Lynch, the local blacksmith.

Timothy's four boys had the chore of lighting the church's wood stove during the winter. However, as Rose recalled, the stove performed so inadequately that she could usually see her breath during the Mass.

Deprived of frequent Sunday Mass, the people of St. Andrew's looked forward eagerly to the grand annual church event, the Forty Hours Devotion. That weekend, Father Hendrick was able to bring in other priests to assist him with confessions. Donning their Sunday best, parishioners drove in

from the farms on Saturday and stayed overnight in Dundee.

St. Michael's, Penn Yan, had the use of a parochial school since 1883; St. Andrew's was too small to enjoy that privilege. Rose, therefore, attended the district school and, when the time came for her first Holy Communion, she was prepared for the sacrament by her mother.

After completing the preparation, the little girl simply presented herself one Sunday at the Communion rail, and Father Hendrick placed the host on her tongue. It was a happy day, but not one of external solemnity. "We didn't have veils or anything like that," she related.

Confirmation came next, in 1902. Rose's mother had to take her to St. Michael's, Penn Yan, for that sacrament, since Bishop McQuaid did not confirm in mission churches. This involved an overnight trip for mother and daughter. When they arrived at the church, Mrs. Tenbrook told Father Hendrick that Rose was all ready to be confirmed. She assured him, doubtless with motherly pride, that she had required Rose to memorize the catechism, and then carefully tested her on its contents. Very well, said the pastor, she may be confirmed. So Rose Tenbrook lined up with the other young parishioners, who approached Bishop McQuaid to receive the sacrament and, afterward, took the pledge to abstain from alcoholic beverages until the age of 21.

What is remarkable about this story is that in spite of their limited pastoral care, Catholics remained strong in their faith. "The parishioners of St. Andrew's," Rose said, "were very

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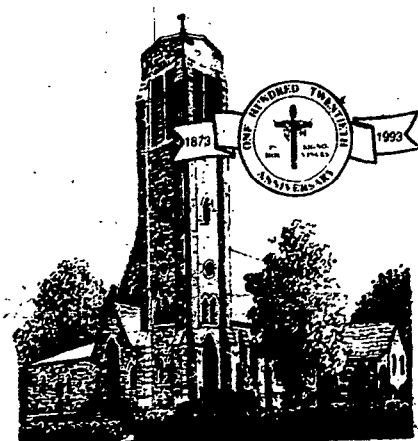
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