

## Lyons parish houses one of diocese's treasures

By Father Robert F. McNamara  
Guest contributor

America can never match Europe in magnificent churches and devotional works of art. Nevertheless, our country boasts many distinguished church buildings as well as religious paintings and sculptures. These are not well-known because they have not been sufficiently publicized.

This is also true of the Diocese of Rochester, which is noted for some extraordinary church buildings and the works of art they contain.

Let's start with the ancient wooden statue of Our Lady of the Annunciation, housed in St. Michael's Church in Lyons. This 15th-century polychrome madonna is noteworthy not only for its beauty and piety, but for the story of how it was acquired by the Lyons parish.

The statue was a gift of Lyons' outstanding native, the Episcopalian financier and diplomat Myron George Taylor (1874-1959). Mr. Taylor left his home village for New York, moved ever upward in business, and eventually became the president of U.S. Steel. Gifted not only as a banker but as a conciliator, he was asked by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s to devise the National Recovery Act.

President Roosevelt was so pleased with the financier's work that when World War II broke out in 1939, he appointed Mr. Taylor his personal representative to the Vatican, with ambassadorial rank. Mr. Taylor discharged well this important but controversial task, paying most of the expenses out of his own pocket. After FDR's death in 1945, President Harry S. Truman kept Ambassador Taylor on in the same position until Mr. Taylor chose to resign in 1949.

Myron Taylor's generosity was not restricted to "dollar-a-year" political service. Having no family of their own, he

and his wife Anabel Mack Taylor spent their large fortune on many philanthropies. Cornell University, the ambassador's alma mater, was a major beneficiary. The Vatican was another. Mr. Taylor had become a close friend of Pope Pius XII. To the Holy See, through the pope, they deeded their lovely home outside Florence, Italy, the Villa Schifanoia.

Nor did Mr. Taylor forget his hometown. The Lyons Community Center, hospital, and public park are monuments to his benevolence. A deeply Christian man, he also remembered Lyons' churches — all of them. After his death, the "Taylor Foundation" began to pay — and continues to do so to this day — an annual subsidy to each of the churches.

During his lifetime the former ambassador gave two gifts to St. Michael's Catholic Church. On one occasion, donated a hand-carved Christmas crib assemblage. And in 1926 he surprised the parishioners with the statue of Our Lady of the Annunciation.

Mr. and Mrs. Taylor were interested in the fine arts. Myron served for some years as a trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the couple were discriminating collectors of antiques and art objects. One day, Mr. Taylor discovered in Florence a polychrome wooden statue of Our Lady that he decided to



Joseph Doles  
This 15th-century wooden statue of Our Lady of the Annunciation is housed inside St. Michael's Church in Lyons.

present to the Catholic parish in his native village.

The St. Michael's madonna, which stands almost four feet high, depicts Mary seated, clothed in a maroon dress with buttoned-over white cuffs, and mantled with a long veil of dark blue. The intricate drapes are expertly carved. Her left hand, resting on her knee, holds a small book. Her right hand is lifted in a gesture of surprise and wonder.

A rather unusual statue of Mary. Or is it Mary?

Yes, it is Mary of the Annunciation. When given as a gift it was so labeled, and the little book she is holding confirms this to be the case. Our Lady is represented here at the moment when Gabriel told her that she was to be the mother of the Messiah. In Christian depictions of this moment, the Blessed Virgin is traditionally shown with a book — the Bible — in hand or close by. This is to show that she was familiar with the

Old Testament's prophecies about the Savior. Normally, Renaissance artists depicted the archangel, too. We may suppose, therefore, that the Lyons statue was originally paired with one of Gabriel.

The donor must have been unable to discover the full history of this madonna. Local newspapers said nothing of the sculptor, asserting only that the statue was from some noted monastery in Florence, and that it dated from the 14th century. Now, we know that can't be correct. The style is that of the 15th century. One parish booklet hints that the carving had Siene connections. This is very plausible. The Florentine sculptors of the 1400s preferred to work in marble or bronze. Their fellow-sculptors in Siena continued to favor wood. Therefore the Lyons Mary is probably the work of a Siene artist.

St. Michael's parishioners seem to have had mixed feelings about the image, perhaps because it represented Mary in a less-familiar manner. But in 1938, the pastor, Father Andrew T. Dissett, upon redecorating the church, erected a special Annunciation shrine. Bishop James E. Kearney blessed this shrine on May 27, 1938.

Nevertheless, a subsequent pastor removed the statue, using its niche for a second confessional. Mary ended up in the basement! This was to prove embarrassing, for when Mr. Taylor dropped in one day to see the statue. It was subsequently relocated in the baptistery.

From 1984-1986, Father Richard Orlando, pastor from 1968-93, remodeled the church interior to comply with the revised liturgy. He returned Our Lady of the Annunciation to her former place in the church. By this time, however, the paint was beginning to peel. Therefore, in 1992, the parish council and the renovation committee authorized its careful restoration.

They entrusted this delicate task to Clyde's Loreena Dembinski, an artist and the proprietor of Clyde's well-known restoration studio, "The Doll Factory and Finishing Touches."

The artist first stripped the paint down to the original wood. Several colors had been used in earlier restorations: light blue, pink and even yellow. But the sculptor himself had originally given Our Lady a maroon dress and a dark blue veil. Significantly, these were the Marian colors most used by Tuscan carvers and painters in the 15th century.

Dembinski said she found the wood generally firm. There were many worm holes — typical of old Italian woodwork of any sort. But only one portion at the hem of the dress had crumbled. This area she reconstructed with a bit of screen and some auto-body filler.

The Taylor Madonna is not only well-crafted, but it is deeply spiritual. Mary is presented as the teenager that she was, but her face is as earnest as it is innocent. She has just been asked the world's greatest question: will you freely consent to become the Mother of God? Startled, but ever obedient to the Father's will, Mary can't refuse. With a gentle bow of the head, she says to Gabriel, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

The Florentine monks or women religious who venerated this image probably long before Columbus discovered America, must surely have read its lesson of humility. Today, in a little American village, the treasured statue still admonishes us, as Mary admonished the hand servants at Cana, "Do whatever He tells you."

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Father McNamara, diocesan archivist, lives at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Irondequoit.

### We're Leaping With Joy

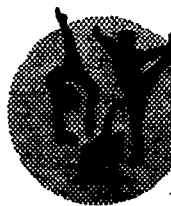


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