

# CONTINUED...

## Painting

continued from page 1

adjacent townships in northwestern Steuben County. A large percentage of these settlers hailed from St. Wendel in the Rhineland Diocese of Trier. Farmers in the Rhenish uplands, they had come over to farm and harvest lumber in the uplands of western New York state. Loyal Catholics in a strongly Protestant milieu, they trudged or wagoned the 50 miles to the nearest church, St. Patrick's in Rochester, for baptisms. The rest of the time, however, they were in danger of losing their Catholicism by attrition.

Fortunately, a pioneer German Redemptorist, Father Joseph Prost, "discovered" this scattered flock in 1836. Thereafter German Redemptorists from Rochester kept in touch with them. In 1839 the German Catholics who had located on Sandy Hill above Perkinsville set up a small log chapel dedicated to Mary and ringed by a graveyard, to accommodate all German Catholics in the vicinity. But in 1845 the growing Catholic populace in a Dansville built its own frame church, St. Mary's, on the village's busy Franklin Street.

In 1847 all western New York became the new Diocese of Buffalo. Two years later, its founding bishop, John Timon, made St. Mary's a full-fledged German-language parish, with Father Andrew Schweiger as the first resident pastor. In 1851 Bishop Timon transferred Father Schweiger elsewhere and named as second resident pastor Father Aloysius Somoggi.

Of Father Somoggi (or Somogyi), the artist-pastor, we know all too little. Born in Hungary in 1806 or 1807, he had earned a doctorate of divinity and been ordained a priest somewhere in Europe. Coming at length to the Diocese of Buffalo, he served as Bishop Timon's vicar-general for the German-speaking. He was a strikingly handsome man, but his pallor intimated uncertain health.

Pallid or not, the new pastor had a bustling first year. Soon after his arrival a young man of the parish died after a costly illness, leaving his widow and children penniless. The compassionate priest, contributing out of his own meager funds, rallied the parishioners to provide for the family's needs. In 1852 he also organized the St. Boniface Society, a benevolent parish association, to anticipate such tragic crises. His good deeds won for him the admiration of his own people and of non-Catholic Dansvillians as well.

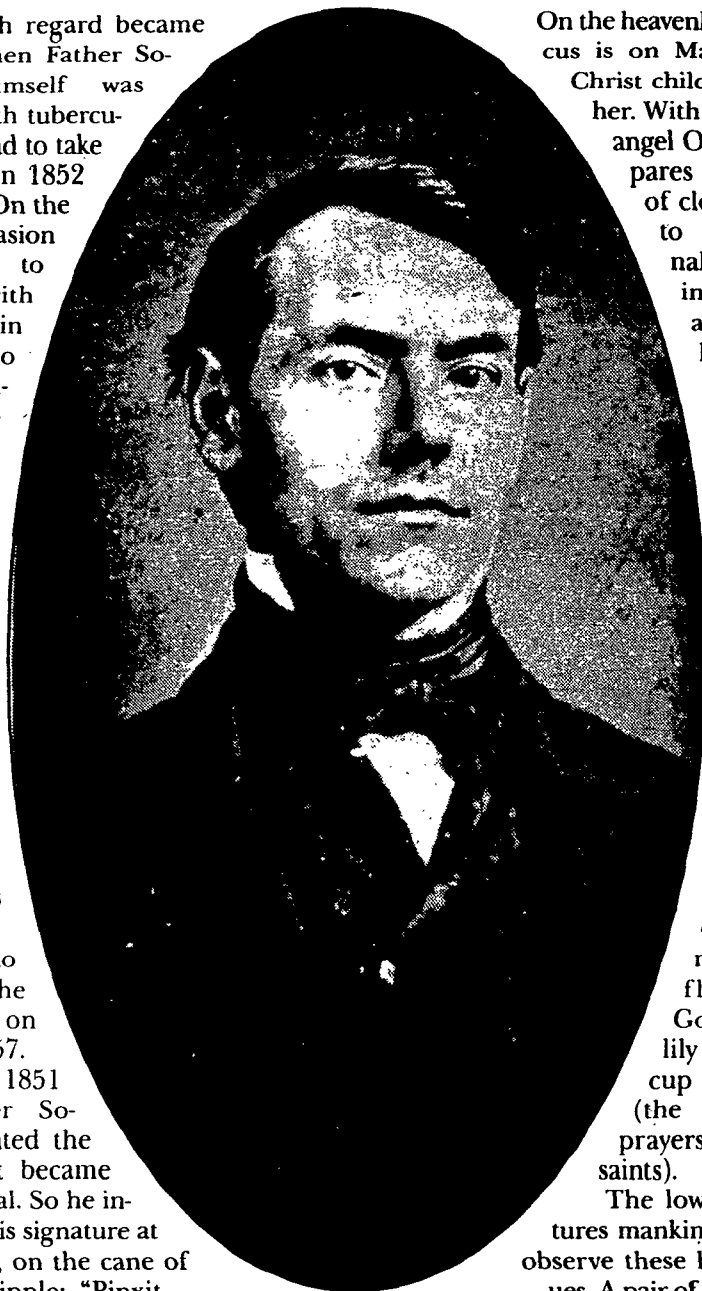
This high regard became evident when Father Somoggi himself was stricken with tuberculosis. He had to take sick leave in 1852 and 1855. On the second occasion he wanted to consult with physicians in Hungary, so the parishioners volunteered to pay his traveling expenses. The physicians, however, sent him back without hope. Therefore at the end of 1855 the bishop relieved him of his pastorate. Returning to Hungary, he died there on Dec. 31, 1857.

It was in 1851 that Father Somoggi painted the canvas that became his memorial. So he indicated in his signature at the bottom, on the cane of an aged cripple: "Pinxit Aloysius Somoggi, D.D., Dansville 1851." ("Pinxit" translates roughly as "Painted by.")

As the painting shows, he had studied art, and could be termed "semi-professional." His tutors are unknown; but his spirit is much like that of the "Nazarenes," a school of German Catholic artists at that time who, having studied in Rome, went back to Germany intent on creating a pictorial style with strong religious and patriotic emphasis.

Father Somoggi himself wrote a description of "Heaven and Earth - God and Man" to justify his religious symbolism by scriptural references.

Two levels are pictured, the heavenly and the earthly. Although clearly separate, they are deftly linked by a few "vertical" gestures, like raised eyes and uplifted hands.



Father Aloysius Somoggi

On the heavenly level the focus is on Mary and the Christ child pointing to her. With the aid of an angel Our Lady prepares two lengths of cloth destined to "clothe the naked." Framing Mother and Child is a host of angels. Many bear symbols of divine revelation: a light (truth); the Ark of the Covenant (the Ten Commandments); a church building and a pillar (the church); a mirror (reflection on God's law); a lily (purity); a cup and a rose (the collected prayers of the saints).

The lower level pictures mankind striving to observe these heavenly values. A pair of Apostles represent the church militant, its governance and

achievements. A touching group in left foreground summarizes the works of mercy: and aged man, resigned in spirit but poor and disabled, and an innocent little orphan girl, are cared for by a willing young man and two affluent but unselfish young women.

Thus far, the painting speaks to the faithful of every nation; but two remaining details imply a German audience.

The first is the lay couple kneeling at the right. They are the German rulers St. Henry II and St. Kunigunde. Henry (973-1024) was Holy Roman Emperor; Kunigunde (980?-1039?), his empress. German Catholics revered them as an ideal lay couple, devoted to church, state and the needy.

The second detail is the tiny landscape at lower center. Delicately painted, it depicts a typical Rhenish castle on its rocky crag, silhouetted against a misty mountain range: a vision of the dear fatherland.

"Heaven and Earth" is, of course, a period piece. It also contains some incidental flaws - such as the perspective of one angel, some depictions of other angels and the Apostles - that are not surprising because the artist was an amateur. But they are offset by such skills as general composition, three-dimensionality and the rendition of fabrics and metals. Although created for German immigrants as a poignant homily on Mary, Mediatrix of Graces, it must now be reckoned a treasure of the whole Diocese of Rochester.

Today the Somoggi altarpiece, located since 1915 in the splendid second St. Mary's Church on Elizabeth Street, is usually covered by a curtain to protect it from deterioration. The curtain is opened during May and October and at Christmas so that the 136-year-old painting can continue to announce clearly its artist's message: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will."

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 409