CONTINUED...

Schools

continued from page 1

In 1789 Pope Pius VI established the first Catholic diocese in the United States, and the challenges to thrive in the new country were many. Baltimore's Bishop John Carroll, the first bishop of the United States, declared in the late 1700s that without Catholic schools or similar social institutions, untold numbers of Catholics would be lost to the church.

Rochester's first bishop, Bishop Bernard McQuaid (1868-1909), fought long and loudly for Catholic schools. In a citywide parochial schools celebration on the silver jubilee of his episcopate, he stated:

"...(W)hen the question of Catholic education for Catholics was all but dead, God gave me the courage to go before non-Catholics as well as before weak-hearted Catholics to raise my voice and point out that, if we were contented to rest with a non-Catholic education for our children, we were writing the death warrant of the Catholic Church in this country."

Early Rochester schools

Bishop McQuaid would be proud to see St. Mary's School in Canandaigua celebrating its 150th anniversary this school year, as the second-oldest school still operating in the Diocese of Rochester.

"For all the 150 years St. Mary's School has been a beacon of guidance and good example, learning and formation in the lives of thousands of young people," St. Mary's pastor, Father Walter Wainwright, remarked last year in a bulletin article anticipating the celebration.

St. Mary's School in Dansville holds the title as the oldest operating school in the diocese, dating back to 1845, or possibly 1842.

Dansville had a Catholic school before it had a resident priest, according to Father Robert F. McNamara. In his history of the diocese, the diocesan archivist noted that Redemptorist Father Benedict Bayer started school sessions for the German Catholics of Dansville in 1842.

"The German parishes are therefore the indisputable founders of the present Rochester diocesan school system," Father McNamara wrote, noting that St. Joseph's in Rochester also had opened a school in 1836 but that facility eventually closed.

When Dansville residents started a Catholic church in 1845, they opened a more formal school in an old public school building.

"The school flourished in this rustic building where pencils squeaked over slate tablets and students recited in sing-song," noted *Parish Pathways II* by Wilfred J. Rauber.

Krista Laskowski, 12, plays the chimes at Mass Feb. 13 at St. Mary's Church in Canandaigua. She and other students played in the choir to celebrate Catholic Schools Week.

"An acceptable excuse for a boy's absence was that he had to clean the well, buck some fire wood, or help with the crops. The absence of a girl was not frowned upon if she had to cook meals for the family while her mother was ill or if she was assisting in putting up preserves or making kraut."

Rauber's history of St. Mary's, Dansville, reports that about 40 children were being taught by a lay teacher around 1850.

While costs are not specified for St. Mary's, it is known, for example, that in 1810 at St. Peter's, New York, the school master received $400 a year. In Brooklyn's St. Mary's school, pupils were charged $3 a month in the late 1820s.

Religious orders eventually provided the boost needed for parish schools to thrive. The Sisters of St. Joseph arrived in Canandaigua in 1877 to teach at St. Mary's. Various other teaching orders taught throughout parish schools in the diocese as well.

In Canandaigua, St. Mary's first schoolteachers were lay people, however. Thomas Hynes, who later became a priest and pastor in Niagara Falls, was the first teacher. Father Edmund O'Connor began the school in 1849, and classes were held in the basement of the original church at Main and Saltonstall streets.

In December 1854, four Sisters of St. Joseph arrived in Canandaigua by boat and railroad from St. Louis, Mo. Bishop John Timon of Buffalo – Canandaigua was then in the Buffalo Diocese – had requested their help. The sisters first established St. Mary's Orphan Asylum, and in 1856 the St. Mary's Academy for Young Ladies.

An academy ad in the 1856 Catholic Almanac and Directory stated: "This Institution under the charge of the Sisters of St. Joseph, located in one of the most healthy and beautiful parts of the states is easy of access. The N.Y. Central passes through here, the Canandaigua and Elmira connecting with the New York and Erie terminates here, as does also the Canandaigua and Niagara Falls connecting with Canada and Great Western Railroad."

The sisters charged $80 for board and tuition per year; $10 for washing, mending, bed and bedding; and a $5 entrance fee. Music, drawing and language classes were provided for extra charge. Classes ran from the first Monday of September until July 17. In those early days, the sisters left the teaching of male students to two laymen.

Orphan asylums became common, especially after yellow fever and cholera left countless children as orphans. They provided not only homes for the poor but also education for the community.

However, religious orders provided such services free of charge and therefore they did not support the orders. So, "select" or private schools were opened as well. However, Bishop Timon ordered in 1864 that the two schools the Sisters of St. Joseph operated in Canandaigua be combined into one general school for all students.

"It was a sore point with the bishop," said Sister Jean Agnes Michaud, Sisters of St. Joseph archivist. "He wanted everything free."

The sisters remained at St. Mary's School until 1996, when the last two, Sister Benedicta Redmond and Sister Teresa Singer, returned to the motherhouse in Pittsford.

Bishops battle

Throughout the 1800s, meanwhile, bishops were stressing the importance of Catholic schools, and some felt forced to take strong public stands.

New York Archbishop John Hughes' campaign against public schools from 1840-42 marked a turning point in the church's effort to establish parish schools, according to some scholars. He had tried without success to obtain state funds for Catholic schools, but he was able to get the state legislature to end New York City's Public School Society's control over the distribution of state money to public schools – schools that promoted Protestant religions.

It was such nondenominational but Protestant orientation that concerned the early Catholic leaders. For instance, the King James Bible was a core text in the common schools, according to Walch.

In an 1872 lecture, Bishop McQuaid noted that despite New York State law banning religious exercises in the public schools, "The practice in most of the schools, and notably here in Rochester, is to ignore the law, and in utter disregard of the rights of the minority, for the majority is made up of Evangelicals, to have that amount of Bible reading, praying, and the singing of hymns which seems pleasing to them."

Decades earlier, some state funds had been granted to Catholic parish schools. In 1806, for example, St. Peter's School in New York City received state funds, as did other denominational schools. The grants were discontinued in 1825. According to Walch's book, the Public School Society, a nominally Protestant civic organization, had convinced the state to end support for denominational schools in New York City, in favor of supporting nondenominational Protestant schools the society sponsored.

In his heyday, Bishop McQuaid took up the fight for justice, arguing that Catholic parents were paying two taxes – one to state-supported schools their children did not attend, and one to Catholic schools they did attend.

In a lecture, the bishop stated it was wrong for the state to interfere with parents' right to educate their children. The state did so by establishing common schools at the expense of all taxpayers, he said, "especially in the case of poor parents who find it a burden to pay double taxes."

In a few communities parochial schools were incorporated into the public school system. According to Father McNamara's history, three parishes in the present diocese of Rochester had such an arrangement. At St. Mary's, Corning, the parochial school operated under the public board of education in or before 1865, he noted. The plan continued until 1898, even after the Sisters of Mercy began to staff the school in 1867. Known today as All Saints Academy, the school is the diocese's third-oldest, dating to 1855.

In Elmira, Sts. Peter and Paul's School operated similarly from 1867 to 1876, when the plan was abandoned because of friction with the local board of education. And in Lima the Catholic school was incorporated into the public schools in 1874.

The education boards usually paid a nominal rent for parish schools, teachers' salaries, and the costs of insurance and maintenance. The pastors agreed that teachers would meet teaching standards of the local boards, work under their control and that no religious devotions would take place during official school hours.

Public schools had "made great progress" between two plenary councils of the U.S. bishops, 1866-1884, according to Peter Guilday's *A History of the Councils of Baltimore*. And religious teaching and influence declined with the steps they made.

"There is no doubt that during these years the problem of Catholic children in these schools was the dominant anxiety of our prelates and clergy," he wrote.

In 1871, Bishop McQuaid launched a campaign for diocesanwide tuition-free parish schools. On June 8 that year, he staged a "magnificent citywide procession of Catholic children of school age," Father McNamara wrote. "Thousands of youngsters, white-clad girls and flag-waving boys, marched from each of the city parishes to the Cathedral and from the Cathedral to Jones Square."

Rochester's bishop never wavered from an Oct. 4, 1878, pastoral letter stating: "All whose eyes are open – whose experience in this country embraces the last thirty or forty years – see clearly that, unless children are trained, nurtured, schooled under Catholic influences and teachings, they will be lost to God's Church."

Once the parishes had adequate tuition-free schools, he ordered that parents who failed to send their children to the school be denied absolution in confession. He felt vindicated, according to Father Zwierlein, when an Instruction on the Public Schools was issued by the Congregation for the Holy Office for the Bishops of the United States. Nov. 24, 1875. That document proclaimed:

"...(I)t is manifest from Catholic moral teaching that parents cannot be absolved in the sacrament of penance who neglect to impart to their children this necessary Christian education and training, or who allow them to frequent such schools in which the ruin of souls is inevitable...."

In May 1893, however, Pope Leo XIII confirmed in a letter to U.S. archbishops that he stood behind proposals of Archbishop Francesco Satolli, the first permanent apostolic delegate to the United States. New parish schools were to be encouraged, yet permission was to be given for Catholic children to attend public schools. Clergy could not withhold sacraments to the parents of those children.

Bishop McQuaid wrote to a fellow bishop, "We are all in a nice pickle thanks to Leo XIII and his delegate. Just as our arduous work of the last forty years was beginning to bear fruit, they arbitrarily upset the whole. If an enemy had done this!"

Catholic schools continued to multiply, however, and enrollment peaked in 1966 at 5.6 million throughout the United States.