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New Jersey Catholic Records Newsletter

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WINTER 1997

Lively Conference on Writing Parish History Held at Seton Hall

The Commission-sponsored conference on "Writing Parish History," held at Seton Hall University on September 28, provided a lively, and at times hilarious, introduction into the joys and problems of researching and writing local Catholic history. Attended by men and women from across the state (and a few from out-of-state), the sessions examined sources, pitfalls, planning research and writing, and some of the unwritten sources of parish history.

After brief welcoming remarks by Bishop Dominic A. Marconi, D.D., chairman of the Commission, Father Raymond J. Kupke led off the day with a talk entitled "The Folks in the Attic." The title refers to his having discovered a boxful of photographs and other artifacts in the attic of a rectory, and the presentation illustrated how following the leads provided in the photographs resulted in a much richer story. The new perspectives the photographs suggested related the history of the parish to other events, to the social structures and attitudes of the times, and so fit the parish history into its proper context. In his conclusion, Father Kupke reminded his hearers that "Nothing just started," and suggested that they look into the context to understand the sources.

Father Michael G. Krull followed with an address answering the question, "What Should the Parish Save?" Citing his own experience in researching various parish histories, he described finding one place which had saved every reference to the parish and every scrap of paper the
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Speakers at the "Writing Parish History" conference on September 28 are from left to right: Reverend Armand Mantia, Reverend Raymond J. Kupke, William Kowalski, Ruth Paci, Sister Mary Ellen Gleason, S.C., program committee chairwoman and emcee, Reverend Michael G. Krull and Most Reverend Dominic A. Marconi, D.D., chairman of the Commission.

The Sisters Come to Saint John's, New Brunswick

By the end of the Civil War in 1865 the number of German Catholics in and around New Brunswick was large enough to support a separate national parish and in November of that year Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley sent Father Gregory Misdziol to begin what would become St. John the Baptist church. The next few years were busy with church building and organizing the parish, so it was not until the third pastor, Father Henry Theodore Martens, arrived in 1873 that attention could be given to providing a parish school.

Children of St. John's had been attending classes at St. Peter's parish school, but in view of the very strong desire of many German Catholics to preserve their language and culture as a means of preserving their faith, that situation was an inadequate substitute for their own parish school. In August, 1874, with the approval of Bishop Michael Augustine Corrigan, the parish trustees voted to begin the school. Over the next several months they erected a three-story building which opened in the
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Lively Conference on Writing Parish History Held at Seton Hall

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parish had originated, and another where only the required sacramental and fiscal records had been kept.

Canon Law requires that sacramental and certain other records be retained, and these are essential to writing a parish history, but much more is needed. Newspaper clippings of significant events in the parish history, commemorative booklets, programs of specific activities—these and similar materials ought also to be saved carefully. While it may involve some initial difficulty, setting up a file of pertinent newspaper articles is a wise way of preserving very useful data. And, finally, interviews with knowledgeable parishioners and with clergy or nuns who served in the parish can provide much insight into parish development.

Two panelists, Ruth Baci and William Kowalski, followed Father

Krull. Both have done notable work in parish history recently. Baci wrote the history of Holy Rosary Parish in Edgewater, *Down by the River and Under the Cliff*. She discussed with the audience the seven key elements in her process of researching and composing the parish history. First among these was the establishment of an oral history program with older parishioners and with people who had served the parish. The second was the establishment of a “history corner” in the parish bulletin, so that each week a snippet of parish history was discussed and then a question (to be answered the following week) was asked. These two devices kept the parish interested and informed, and generated new sources of information and new archival materials for her.

Library and archival research and setting up a “quick-retrieval” filing system were the next two elements of the project. Writing the text, selection of

illustrations to match and supplement the story, and determining a publication process were the remaining factors.

William Kowalski then discussed how he went about researching and writing *Sacred Art and Ornamentation of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, Bayonne*. He brought with him much material to illustrate his points, and soon converted the presentation into a question-and-answer format with a fascinated audience.

At lunch, Father Armand Mantia, who regularly guides visitors through Sacred Heart Cathedral, Newark, spoke of the relation of the cathedral church to the people of the diocese and illustrated his points by taking the audience on a virtual tour of Sacred Heart. To conclude the day, those who wished toured Seton Hall’s new Walsh Library and the facilities of the Archives there, under the tutelage of JoAnn Cotz.

The Sisters Come to Saint John’s

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spring of 1875 with about 30 pupils and one lay teacher, a Mister Brockmayer, who was succeeded in the following year by a Mister Amon.

Martens, however, was dissatisfied with the arrangement and began looking for a religious community to take charge of the school. In June, 1877, he visited the Sisters of Christian Charity at their school in Elizabeth and invited them to inspect New Brunswick. This community had been forced to flee Germany by the *Kulturkampf*, and was beginning to establish itself in this country. Martens met with the sisters again at their headquarters in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

By July 31 he sent them a copy of the agreement signed by himself and Bishop Corrigan. His accompanying letter added that, as he had been paying for the water for the lay teacher, he would do so for the sisters. He also promised to do his best to insure that the sisters would “gradually have it as comfortable as one

might have it in any house in the United States.”

In September, 1877, three professed sisters and a postulant arrived. Sister Isabella Hemprich taught the upper class, which consisted of fourth-, fifth- and sixth-graders and occupied the classroom on the first floor of the school building. Sister Isabella also had charge of the choir, played the organ and was the superior of the little community. Sister Angeline Albermann taught the lower class (grades one through three) in the basement, and Sister Aurelia Becker, assisted by the postulant, had charge of cooking, cleaning and washing.

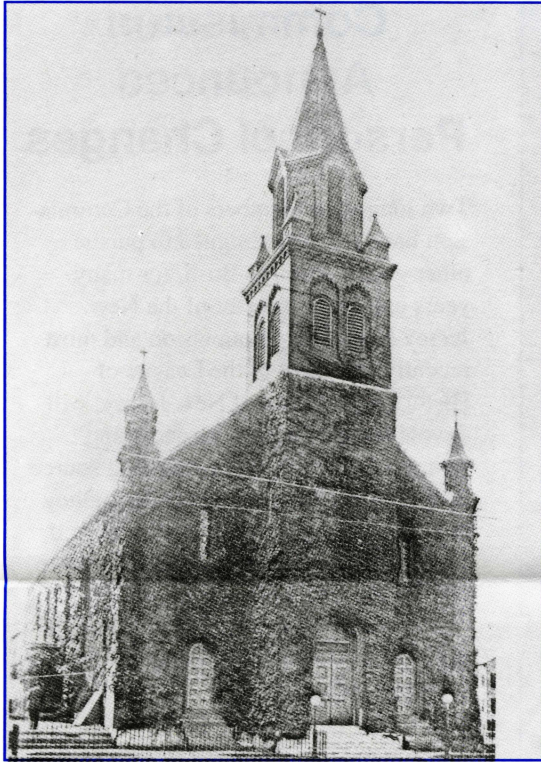
The second and third floors of the building served as a convent for the sisters and also as a boarding school for a few of the pupils. Because St. John’s parish included German-speaking Catholics from as far as Perth Amboy, it was more convenient for students from some distance to remain at the school



*Reverend Henry Theodore Martens,
pastor, 1873-1889*

during the week and go home only on weekends.

Bishop Corrigan’s journal notes that not everyone at St. John’s was pleased with the new arrangements. When he came to the parish on Sunday, October 14, 1877, he confirmed some 40 people, and then attended a meeting in the school-house concerning the replacement of the lay teacher by the Sisters of Christian Charity. Corrigan reports that “all agreed to the change, except two interested parties.” Who the latter were is not



The Church of St. John the Baptist, New Brunswick



Interior of the Church of St. John the Baptist, New Brunswick



St. John the Baptist School, New Brunswick

clarified elsewhere. Perhaps one or both of the previous teachers? *The New Brunswick Daily Times* noted the Confirmation visit but made no mention of a meeting in the schoolhouse, unless its statement that “Father Martens’s labors were fully appreciated by both bishop and people” is an oblique comment on what can only have been minimal disgruntlement.

In 1878 and again in 1880 Martens bought additional property and one-story buildings to serve as adjuncts to the school as its pupils increased. In 1881 a new fifteen-year-old postulant arrived to help the sisters. Years later Sister Berthilla Kremer recalled her early years at St. John’s.

The kitchen and dining room, scullery and pantry were now in the basement, and the community room, parlor, and two small bedrooms were in the first story of the main house. . . . The Sisters had plenty of room and plenty of work. Sister Isabella had a full class, the organ and choir, and charge of the house. Sister Ludmilla had three grades, the church, the sewing, etc. Sister Serena had cooking, baking, washing and ironing. . . . Each classroom had a stove. I had to take care of both. . . . From 8:30 a.m. till 3:00 p.m. I assisted Sister Ludmilla

in the classroom. On Mondays I stood at the wash-tub with good Sister Serena from 3 till 6 o’clock; she then prepared supper, which we had at 7, and I said my office. On Tuesday I helped with the ironing; on Wednesday I had to slice corn-leaves used in bags, which served as mattresses. On Thursday I scrubbed two rooms; by this every room got a scrubbing about once every two months, except the dining room and hallway; this was scrubbed every Friday after luncheon. On Saturdays I helped Sister Ludmilla in church. . . . Sunday was the day for studying.

No wonder she commented that “The Sisters were janitors, and sextons and almost everything.”

Martens apparently did his best to improve their living conditions and the

additional classroom space relieved the crowding in the schoolhouse/convent. One early report noted that he “takes care with great goodness and generosity” of the sisters, but remarked also that the dispersed population tended to keep enrollment down and made for a heavier burden on the parish.

Father Martens had to resign his pastorate in 1889 because of failing health. He sought recovery in Florida, but died shortly after arriving there. In the following year the Sisters of Christian Charity withdrew from New Brunswick. In that year the enrollment of the parish school was 49 boys and 38 girls. For a short time in 1890 the church lacked a resident pastor, no German-speaking priest being available. But by autumn, a new pastor had made arrangements with the Sisters of Charity of Convent Station to take charge of the school, and parish life began to return to normal.

Gleason to Give Gerety Lecture on February 5

On February 5, 1997, in the chapel of the Immaculate Conception Seminary on the Seton Hall University campus, Professor Philip Gleason of the University of Notre Dame will deliver the next Gerety lecture on ecclesiastical history, "The Identity of a Catholic University."

Professor Gleason is a distinguished historian of the Catholic experience in America and has

published numerous books and articles on the subject. His latest book, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century*, examines the development of American Catholic colleges and universities from the aftermath of the Modernist controversy to the era of Vatican Council II, a process he describes (admittedly too simply) as a transition from challenging modernity to accepting modernity.

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Most Reverend Dominic A. Marconi, D.D., *Chairman*; Reverend Monsignor Joseph C. Shenrock, *Vice Chairman*; JoAnn Cotz; Reverend Augustine Curley, O.S.B.; Reverend Monsignor William N. Field; Reverend Monsignor Charles J. Giglio; Reverend Michael G. Krull; Reverend Raymond J. Kupke; Joseph F. Mahoney; Sister Margherita Marchione, M.P.F.; Reverend Monsignor Robert Moneta; George L.A. Reilly; Sister Irene Marie Richards, O.P.; Sister Thomas Mary Salerno, S.C.; Bernhard W. Scholz; Reverend Monsignor Francis R. Seymour; Reverend Joseph D. Wallace; Peter J. Wosh. Joseph F. Mahoney, *Newsletter Editor*

Commission Announces Personnel Changes

Two long-time members of the Commission have recently resigned to pursue other goals. Bernard Bush, for many years executive director of the New Jersey Historical Commission and most recently president of the League of Historical Societies of New Jersey, will devote his time now to research and writing. He has been an unfailing source of information, a wise adviser on policy matters, an acute evaluator of proposed projects, and most of all a good friend to each of us. His work on the publications committee has helped shape some of the projects we are still preparing, so his legacy is still growing.

Sister Mary Ellen Gleason, S.C. has chaired the public programs committee and been mainly responsible for the success of these annual projects. In addition, she has been a knowledgeable adviser on many proposed projects and could always be relied upon to pitch in and help on any task. We shall miss them and their counsel. We wish them every success in their future pursuits.

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