Summer 1988

New Jersey Catholic Records Newsletter, Vol. 7, No.2

New Jersey Catholic Historical Commission

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Paterson diocese celebrates golden jubilee

Since December 1987 Catholics of northwestern New Jersey have celebrated the 15th anniversary of that day in December 1937 when the Holy See separated the three counties of Morris, Passaic and Sussex from the diocese of Newark. This separation established a new diocese with its see city at Paterson. At the same time, Rome established the diocese of Camden by separation of southern counties from the diocese of Trenton, and created the ecclesiastical province of New Jersey with Newark as the metropolitan see.

But if the diocese of Paterson is just 50 years old, Catholicism in northwest New Jersey dates back to the 18th century. For 21 years, beginning in 1765, Father Ferdinand Farmer, the Jesuit "apostle of New Jersey" served several groups of Catholics in the area of the later Paterson diocese, mostly around the ironworks of the Ringwood and Mount Hope areas. After the American Revolution, groups of French, German and Irish Catholics established themselves in various parts of the area which later became the Diocese of Paterson. But the principal growth of New Jersey in the 19th century was urban development, as industrialization promoted dense living circumstances and lured immigrants in tens of thousands from all the lands of the old world. Despite the growth of the cities of Paterson and Passaic, and a few others, urban development in north Jersey centered in Essex, Hudson and Union counties. By 1937, although Morris, Passaic and Sussex counties comprised 70 percent of the land area of the Newark diocese, the 125,000 Catholics living there made up only 16 percent of its Catholic population.

The Catholics of the new diocese were served by 91 diocesan and 78 religious priests in 51 parishes and 22 missions. Schools included 31 at the elementary level, 10 high schools and academies, and the College of St. Elizabeth at Convent Station. The diocese also contained three Catholic hospitals, three orphanages and several other social service agencies. Bishop Thomas H. McLaughlin, auxiliary bishop of Newark and rector of "Immaculate Conception Seminary, was installed as the first bishop of Paterson on April 28, 1938. A tall, dignified man of commanding presence, McLaughlin immediately set to work with his people to organize the new diocese and extend the activity of the Church in the area. During the nine and one-half years before his death, 15 of the old missions were raised to parish status and 17 new parishes and missions were established. American entry into World War II postponed the realization of some of Bishop McLaughlin's plans — such as the building of schools to serve each...
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parish — but he did initiate the concept of regional Catholic high schools with the 1939 opening of Pope Pius XII school in Passaic. He also started the St. Peter Claver Institute for religious work among the growing black population of the diocese. McLaughlin suffered the first of several heart attacks in 1941 and never fully recovered his health, but he continued to effectively supervise the diocese until his death on March 17, 1947.

The era after World War II can be called the “years of suburbanization,” as rural townships throughout New Jersey saw an upsurge of population and older cities suffered a relative and then absolute decline. For the Diocese of Paterson, explosive growth was the result and its concomitants challenged the next bishops of Paterson, Thomas A. Boland (1947-1952) and James A. McNulty (1953-1963). These two, each of whom came from the diocese of Newark and were subsequently transferred elsewhere — Boland to Newark and McNulty to Buffalo — guided the Church of Paterson between the end of World War II and Vatican Council II. It was a period of apparently immutable stability in Church practice, and of unceasing building to keep up with the burgeoning population. New parishes were established, 36 parochial schools, three regional high schools and Don Bosco Technical High School opened their doors, and the social services fabric expanded. But the diocese looked outward also, and during McNulty’s tenure it hosted the lay missionary movement, A.I.D. and undertook the support of parishes in Latin America.

In his last year at Paterson, Bishop McNulty attended the first session of Vatican II, but to his successors fell the task of implementing in the diocese the spirit and the regulations of the Council. Bishops James J. Navagh (1963-1965), Lawrence B. Casey (1965-1977) and Frank J. Rodimer (1977- ) have each approached that task in a somewhat different fashion, but the thrust of each was perhaps best expressed by Bishop Casey who in an address to the priests of the diocese said that the “thinking of the Vatican Council should be applied at all levels in the diocese, and this will be done gradually, but as soon as possible.”

In Paterson, as elsewhere, the adjustments have not been without difficulty; some have felt changes unnecessary, some have thought they came too fast, and some not fast enough. But liturgical revision has been implemented, the educational system is adjusting to the changed circumstances of religious and lay life, and the vigor of its early years is still manifested in the work and thought of the Church of Paterson.

As the population continues to increase, new facilities are built. Modes of service change — permanent deacons, lay ministers, a broader variety of roles open to religious and laity alike — but the task remains the same: to bring Christ to the world, and the world to Christ.
May Crowning at the Cathedral of St. John in the late 1950s.

Paterson diocesan history published

As part of its golden jubilee celebration, the Diocese of Paterson has published Living Stones: A History of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Paterson. Father Raymond J. Kupke, a member of the Commission, takes the story from the 18th century days of isolated Catholics and traveling missionaries like the Jesuits Theodore Schneider and Ferdinand Farmer through 1853 to 1937 when the counties of Morris, Passaic and Sussex formed part of the diocese of Newark, to the rapid development of the Diocese of Paterson over the past 50 years. The profusely illustrated work of 462 pages provides a comprehensive story of the life of the Church in northwest New Jersey.

Living Stones is available through Communications, Diocese of Paterson, P.O. Box 1595, Clifton, NJ 07015. This cost is $19.95, plus $3 postage and handling.

Corrigan Journal published

To mark the publication of the Journal of Michael Augustine Corrigan, Bishop of Newark, 1872-1880, on February 3, 1988 the Commission hosted a press conference and reception in the Chancellor's Suite of Seton Hall University. About one hundred people gathered to celebrate the latest addition to the Commission's publication list. Monsignor John J. Petillo, chancellor of the University, welcomed the guests to the campus and accepted a copy of the Journal as a token of the Commission's appreciation of the University's support. Dr. Barry Rosen, director of the New Jersey Historical Society, co-publisher of the volume, expressed satisfaction at the successful completion of the project and admiration for the work of the Commission. Archbishop Theodore McCarrick and Archbishop-emeritus Peter Leo Gerety, who have strongly supported the work of the Commission, briefly addressed the group. On behalf of the New Jersey Committee for the Humanities, Dr. Ann C. Watts accepted a copy of the volume and expressed the Committee's satisfaction at the successful outcome of the project. Grants from the Committee were a principal support of the editorial and publication processes.

Copies of The Diocesan Journal of Michael Augustine Corrigan, Bishop of Newark, 1872-1880 may be obtained from the New Jersey Historical Society, 230 Broadway, Newark, NJ 07104. The price is $35, plus $1.50 for handling and postage.
Meet the Commission

Monsignor Theodore A. Opdenaker, a native of Trenton, New Jersey, attended parochial grammar and high schools in the city and then attended St. Charles College in Catonsville, Maryland. He completed his theology course at St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore, Maryland and was ordained for the diocese of Trenton in 1943. In that same year he took his master’s degree in theology at St. Mary’s University in Baltimore. The following year he completed work for a master’s degree in special education at Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

Assigned by his bishop to Catholic Charities, the social service agency of the Diocese of Trenton, Monsignor Opdenaker then obtained advanced degrees in social work and pastoral counseling and in 1974 completed work for his doctorate in clinical psychology at Columbia University. A year later, he obtained the Doctorate in Ministry from Princeton Theological Seminary. Until his retirement in June 1988 he served as executive director of Catholic Charities in Trenton.

A licensed marriage counselor and nursing home administrator, Monsignor Opdenaker served as chairman of the New Jersey State Advisory Board for Nursing Home Administrators. And since 1947, he has been chairman of the board of the Institute for Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University.

The study of American Catholic history has long been a favorite avocation of Monsignor Opdenaker. He has collected much data for a history of Catholicism in the Trenton area and published a bibliography on the topic in 1976. Recently, he donated an extensive collection of materials to the Commission archives. He has been a member of the Commission since 1976.

Published by the New Jersey Catholic Historical Records Commission, Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey 07079-2696.