Spring 1994

New Jersey Catholic Records Newsletter, Vol. 13, No.3

New Jersey Catholic Historical Commission

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Joseph Michael Flynn’s Legacy Is a Wealth of Early Church History

For 90 years now the first source to which people have turned for the history of Catholics in New Jersey before 1900 has been “Flynn,” i.e., The Catholic Church in New Jersey by Monsignor Joseph M. Flynn, published at Morristown in 1904. Since Flynn was not a historian by training, that may seem somewhat strange.

Joseph M. Flynn was born on January 7, 1848 in Springfield, Massachusetts. His family moved to New York City, where he attended St. Vincent’s Academy, taught by the Christian Brothers, until 1859, when his family moved again, this time to Newark, New Jersey. In Newark he attended St. Patrick’s Cathedral school, then on High Street (now Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard), leaving there in 1861 to begin a business career in a printing company. Three years later, in May 1864, he enlisted in Company B, 37th New Jersey Volunteers and was mustered into federal service for a period of 100 days on June 22. The Thirty-Seventh, under the command of Colonel E. Burd Grubb, spent its active duty in the entrenchments before Richmond and Petersburg and, although it engaged in no formal battles, lost five killed in action, 29 wounded in action and 13 others to illness. Flynn was promoted to corporal in July, and mustered out on October 1, 1864. He remained proud of his military service and later joined A.T.A. Torbert Post, No. 24 of the Grand Army of the Republic, of which he remained a member until his death.

Upon discharge, Flynn returned to the printing firm and also enlisted in the the 2nd Regiment, New Jersey Militia. But his earlier inclinations toward the priesthood resurfaced, and in September 1865 he entered St. Charles’ College, Ellicott City, Maryland, to begin studies. His health, never robust, broke down, and he was advised by physicians to give up his goal, but he managed to continue his studies and in March 1869 transferred to Seton Hall College, whence he graduated in 1870. He later recounted that Bishop Bayley had admitted him only “to gratify the wishes of a dying man,” but Flynn continued his studies and was ordained on May 30, 1874.

His first assignment took him to St. Bridget’s, Jersey City, as assistant to the Reverend Patrick Corrigan, but the “malarious character of the neighborhood” proved unhealthful for him and in November 1875 he was sent to Morristown to recuperate. After a few months there, he was assigned to St. Peter’s Church in New Brunswick, and then in May 1876 he became secretary to Bishop Michael Corrigan. Flynn remained in Newark as secretary, chancellor of the diocese and acting pastor of St. Patrick’s for a year while Monsignor Doane was in Europe. On June 16, 1881 Flynn became pastor of the Church of the Assumption in Morristown and spent the remaining 29 years of his life there.

Pastoral activity demanded most of his attention. Not only the Catholics of Morristown, but also those of Morris Plains and then Whippany, were part of his charge. Those were days of building institutions – a church in Morris Plains and St. Margaret’s in Morristown, a new rectory and a new school for Assumption parish as well as a school for St. Margaret’s. Additionally, the Young Men’s Association obtained a permanent

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Flynn’s Legacy
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home in its own building. Perhaps most notable, Flynn was instrumental in purchasing the old Arnold Tavern and renovating it to serve as the first home of All Souls Hospital. He also persuaded the Grey Nuns of Montreal to staff the facility. Flynn served the diocese as dean of Morris and Sussex counties from 1886 onward and as adviser to Bishop Wigger in many internal activities. He was a fully occupied parish priest.

We can well believe him, then, when he wrote that his first work, The Story of a Parish, 1847-1892, was composed “only when I was able to snatch a few leisure moments from other duties.” This narration of the history of Assumption Parish was written for his parishioners and draws heavily on their recollections and stories handed down from earlier generations. But it also shows evidence of having consulted available documentation and of efforts to resolve discrepancies in the testimony.

Published in 1892, the book was well received in the community and naturally led to Flynn’s next work. The diocese of Newark would celebrate its golden jubilee in 1903, and many desired a history of the diocese as part of the commemoration. With some reluctance, Flynn undertook the task. Bishop John J. O’Connor had called on the pastors and religious superiors to give every possible aid, and the response was substantial, not only from the diocese of Newark but also from the diocese of Trenton. When it appeared in 1904, the work was entitled The Catholic Church in New Jersey. It is an uneven account, because the material on individual parishes often appears pretty much as the pastors submitted it, although Flynn went over the material. As in The Story of a Parish, much of the early material depends on the memory of individuals and the recollections of others which they passed down. But Flynn also included much documentary material—transcriptions of Father Ferdinand Farmer’s baptismal records, e.g., as well as a listing of clergy who served the diocese, and a list of sources which he found helpful. Besides standard published works, these included archival and newspaper sources. The Catholic Church in New Jersey received a hearty reception from its intended audience (the Catholics of the state) when it was published, and has remained a valuable resource.

Professionally trained historians were scarce a century and more ago when Monsignor Flynn was researching and writing. Changes in the history profession have been so profound that they might almost be thought to have made Monsignor Flynn’s work obsolete. Methodologies have surely changed, but Flynn’s comment about gathering “all the facts connected with the progress of religion in our state . . . , to cull the authentic from the fabulous, to verify apparently conflicting statements, and to embody the whole into the present work” remains an acceptable thumbnail sketch of what a historian should do.

Thus, despite changes in the profession, in language and in style, “Flynn” is still a significant resource for New Jersey Catholic history. A recent historian has well summarized the situation: “While there are many inaccuracies and inconsistencies of coverage, the volume provides a wealth of facts, anecdotes and illustrations which are otherwise unavailable.”
The history of St. Peter Claver Parish in Montclair began in 1929 when two retired school teachers and their niece noticed an elderly African-American woman sitting in the last pew during Mass at Sacred Heart Church in Newark. She was Theresa Lane, a laundress employed by the Heller family in the neighborhood. She informed them that she belonged to the “Little Flower Guild,” a group of African-American women whose goal was to purchase a house to provide shelter for young African-American girls coming up from the South to find work. At the same time, another group of African-American Catholics, the “St. Theresa Guild,” also was meeting under the leadership of Ethel Wright. After sharing use of the basement of St. Bridget’s Church in Newark for some time, the two groups united and sought a parish of their own.

On January 14, 1931, Bishop Thomas J. Walsh asked Father Cornelius Ahern, curate at St. Joseph’s in Newark, to direct the diocesan apostolate to African-Americans in Essex County. Eight people attended the first meeting he held in the hall under the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Montclair. The group planned a rally, inviting anyone interested in the Catholic faith to come. Names of interested people were taken and homes visited. Convert classes were organized, in the evening for adults and in the afternoon for children. The good news was spreading.

On June 6, 1931, the first converts of the mission, Mr. and Mrs. Rupert Herbert and their five children, were baptized. June 7 proved a banner day; Father Ahern celebrated the first Mass, at which the Herberts received First Holy Communion. At this liturgy, 23 people, mostly non-Catholics, were present.

Four months later, on October 1, the mission acquired a house at 51 Elm Street, and thereafter Father Ahern or his assistant, Father Shandly, celebrated Mass there each Sunday.

A major step forward occurred on November 5, 1935 when, with 317 parishioners in attendance, Bishop Walsh turned the spade which broke ground for a new church at 56 Elmwood Avenue, Montclair. Mrs. William Hoffmann of East Orange provided the major part of the funds, although there were many other benefactors. Mrs. Hoffmann and Sister Peter Claver drew up an outline plan of what was desired, then sent the plan to Mrs. Hoffmann’s son Albert, a student in the School of Architecture at Yale University, who designed St. Peter Claver Church for his thesis. The design of the church and its appointments were chosen to express the African-American soul. On July 17, 1939, the cornerstone was laid.

Begun as a mission, the community of Saint Peter Claver grew at such a rate that it was accorded parish status in 1973. Today, while still serving a primarily African-American community, the parish provides for the spiritual needs of a number of immigrant groups, surely demonstrating the catholicity of the Church.

Conference Rescheduled

Recent Publications of Interest

Some readers of this Newsletter may be interested in one or more of the following as they relate to New Jersey Catholic history:


The Special Collections Center at Seton Hall University Library recently received a $3,500 grant from the New Jersey Department of Education program for the maintenance and preservation of library materials. The purpose of the grant, which was developed by Associate Director of Special Collections JoAnn Cotz and Conservation Consultant Janet Koch, is to restore the Bishop Winand Wigger Letterbook. The Letterbook is part of the archives of the Archdiocese of Newark, which are maintained at the University. Wigger, the third bishop of Newark, presided over the diocese from 1881 to 1901, an era of very rapid growth in state, nation and diocese.

The Letterbook contains over 700 tissue copies of the bishop's outgoing correspondence, but its condition has been so fragile that it has been completely unavailable to researchers. The grant will facilitate conservation of the first 75 pages and encapsulation of all 700 and thus enable the entire text to be microfilmed, so that future researchers will be able to use the materials.