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Building Churches on New Jersey's Northwest Frontier

“God writes straight with crooked lines,” says the Portuguese proverb. The truth of the observation is exemplified by innumerable instances, among them the expansion of the Catholic Church into Sussex County and the western portions of Passaic and Morris Counties in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Catholics had settled in some of these areas very early, and Fathers Theodore Schneider and Ferdinand Farmer had regularly visited Ringwood and other places in the mid- and late-eighteenth century. The areas, nonetheless, remained sparsely settled, although railroads made them somewhat more accessible. As the end of the nineteenth century approached, northwestern New Jersey entered a growth spurt in population. Because the urban centers continually pushed outward and also because middle- and upper-class urban residents increasingly sought rest and relaxation in unspoiled rural areas, the isolation of northwest New Jersey began to end. Soon the automobile and paved roads would hasten the process. As the general population of the area grew, so did the Catholic population. This development strained the human and financial resources of the local church, but not to the point of rupture.

Prince Otto von Bismarck, chancellor of the German Empire, was unusually one of the factors in providing a solution. His Kulturkampf in the 1870s against the Catholic Church had forced many religious communities out of Germany. Mother Pauline von Mallinckrodt’s

Sisters of Christian Charity came to the diocese of Newark in 1875, as did a small group of Discalced Carmelites. The Sisters remained here, but the Carmelites returned after a year to a different part of Europe. The house they had built in Paterson was soon filled by a group of similarly-expelled Franciscans under the leadership of Father Francis Koch, O.F.M..

Bishop Michael A. Corrigan received them into the diocese in 1876 and asked them to establish a parish for the western section of Paterson, which became Saint Bonaventure’s. The friars prospered here and administered the province in exile from Paterson. When the Kulturkampf ended, the provincial administration returned to Germany, but Koch and others remained here and received Americans into the order in Paterson. Eventually they were separated from the German province and organized as Holy

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Name Province. But all that was well into the future. At the moment, there was work to be done.

Father Francis Koch was born in 1843 and ordained in 1866. In 1880 Bishop Winand Wigger appointed him pastor of St. Anthony's in Butler and over the next several years Koch was very active in Butler and other areas where Franciscans served in the diocese. In 1883 the church in Butler needed the bishop's signature to a note authorizing the borrowing of $500 to build a schoolhouse. In 1884 Koch asked the bishop to dedicate the church of Holy Angels in Little Falls, reported on difficulties getting a satisfactory deed for property, forwarded the Peter's Pence collections from St. Bonaventure's in Paterson and from Macopin, and reminded Wigger he had agreed to forego the Peter's Pence collection in Butler because the whole parish was out of work for over a month.

Father Francis was later sent to Denver by the Franciscans and then to New York City, where he was pastor of St. Francis on 31st Street. In 1904 he returned to Germany to prepare for what he seems to have thought his imminent death. But a year later he returned to Butler and began a 15-year career building new churches in northwest Jersey.

In December, 1906, Bishop John J. O'Connor visited the new chapel being built by Father Francis at Pompton Lakes on the plan of the Catholic Church Extension Society. This recently founded organization tried to preserve the faith of Catholics living in areas remote from any parish by building mission chapels in villages. This provided not only a place for a priest to say Mass occasionally, but also a center for the activities of Catholics and the development of a sense of community. O'Connor was much impressed by the plan and told Koch how, on his train travels around the diocese, he saw village after village with a Protestant church, but hardly ever a Catholic church. The upshot of the conversation was that the Franciscan provincial allowed Father Francis to dedicate himself to the Extension work and O'Connor appointed him the director of the Extension Society in the diocese of Newark.

Koch was well suited to the work. He had spent many years in missionary work and had earlier established mission churches in Little Falls, Ringwood and Riverdale, so he knew the needs of the mission churches. In 1906 he began at Pompton Lakes by saying Mass in a blacksmith shop, and by collecting funds wherever he could, renovated a small clubhouse to serve as a chapel. Our Lady of the Assumption was dedicated on August 15, 1906. That same summer Koch made arrangements to begin saying Mass at Greenwood Lake and by Ascension Day, 1907, the cornerstone of Our Lady of the Lake Church was laid; the church was dedicated on July 14 of that year.
As director of the Extension Society in the diocese, Koch spent many weekends after 1906 speaking in churches throughout the diocese to collect funds for church-building, and his weekdays in the hamlets and villages supervising construction of new churches. He could not rely on one source of funds but had to patch together a crazy quilt of donations in most cases. Typical was the situation at Ringwood.

Although Father Farmer was there as early as 1765 and the Franciscans had been saying Mass there since 1880, only in 1916 did it appear that enough Catholics were there to sustain the costs of a parish. At Christmas that year the Ringwood Mining Company agreed to give enough land for the church. With this promise and $200 of Extension Society funds as seed money, Father Francis went to work.

As Father Raymond Kupke tells the story in Living Stones: A History of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Paterson, “he approached Father Anthony Stein, pastor of St. Joseph’s in Paterson, and suggested that a new church in Ringwood might be a fitting memorial to Father Stein’s silver jubilee and to Father Francis’ own golden jubilee. Father Stein readily agreed and gave Father Francis a personal donation of $100; he also promised to donate a Sunday collection at St. Joseph’s, if the other pastors in the city would do likewise.” Dean McNulty readily agreed and gave a personal donation.

Koch’s confreres at St. Bonaventure were not about to refuse him, nor was Father Adalbert Frey of St. Boniface, where the German-speaking friars often helped out. Then a Paterson woman, Catherine Crew, made a donation of $500 and in her honor the church was named after St. Catherine of Bologna. The final donation was that of the labor of some of the Slovak and Polish parishioners who dug out the foundation and basement. The church was dedicated by Father Stein on November 25, 1917.

In addition to the churches already mentioned, Koch was instrumental in setting up mission churches in Fair Lawn, Elmwood Park,
Gerety Lecture Series Continues

The Archbishop Peter L. Gerety Lectures in Church History will conclude the 1998-1999 series on Thursday, February 11, 1999, with a talk on “Catholicism and Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North.” The featured speaker will be Professor John T. McGreevy of Notre Dame University, whose book Parish Boundaries, published in 1996, examined encounters between American Catholics of European background and African-Americans, both Catholic and non-Catholic, in several northern cities. One reviewer noted that his work provided rich insights into the urban confrontations of the 1960s, their genesis and their results. New Jersey did not figure largely in Parish Boundaries but perhaps the lecture will focus somewhat more on the Garden State. However that may be, Professor McGreevy is well worth hearing.

The lecture will be held in the chapel of Immaculate Conception Seminary on the campus of Seton Hall University in South Orange at 7 p.m.

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Clifton, Rochelle Park, and elsewhere. He also helped to build new churches at Little Falls and Macopin. Building new churches was not Father Francis' only contribution. He helped several congregations pay off their building debts, was instrumental in obtaining vestments and other necessities for a goodly number of churches and he also supervised the building of a new monastery at Butler to serve as the senior philosophy house of Holy Name Province.

Father Francis Koch died on February 5, 1920. He returned that day from an outlying mission to his home base at Butler in a raging blizzard and struggled up the steep hill from the train station to St. Anthony's. Exhausted by the ordeal, he died shortly after reaching the monastery.

Prince Bismarck would not have believed the benefits his Kulturkampf brought to the Catholic Church in northwest New Jersey.