

Festina Parish 100 Years Old; Was Indian Mission

By Lois Slide

Our Lady of Seven Dolors Church at Festina, Iowa, which this year celebrates its 100th anniversary has the unique distinction of being the only parish in the diocese able to trace its genesis back to an Indian mission.

Although the history of the parish is reckoned from 1843, its earlier background presents an accurate view of the prejudices and bigotry encountered by the entire Catholic Church in its growth throughout the Middle West, as pointed out by Major The Rev. M. M. Hoffmann in his historical volume: "Church Founders of the Northwest."

When the United States government built a school for the Winnebago Indians on the Yellow River in 1835, Father Samuel Mazzuchelli, the famous Dominican missionary who had worked among this tribe in Wisconsin, hoped to be appointed as superintendent. Unfortunately, the Indian agent at Prairie du Chien, a fervent Presbyterian, succeeded in securing the commission for his friend, the Rev. David Lowry, a Presbyterian minister totally ignorant of Indian ways, habits, and language and thus wholly incapable of filling the position. The Christian Winnebagoes and many of the whites who had been converted in this district soon tired of the inept Lowry, and clamored for a Catholic priest to minister to them.

Winnebagoes

Shortly after the Winnebagoes were moved to a new reservation at Fort Atkinson on the banks of the Turkey River the Rev. Joseph Cretin, who was later to become the savior of this community, came in contact with them. It was he who persuaded Bishop Mathias Loras of Dubuque to appoint the young Father Remigius Petiot as a resident missionary chaplain to the Winnebagoes. When Father Petiot arrived to take over his duties, he found a large number of Father Mazzuchelli's converts in the territory. He himself became popular with the Indians and baptized a group of them but his success so enraged the Rev. Mr. Lowry that he was compelled to leave. Even the savages were indignant at the conduct of the Presbyterian minister who went so far as to have the priest's crude shack demolished by a captain of the dragoons in his efforts to route him.

Our Lady of the Wilderness

In 1843 Father Cretin took charge of the mission, naming it "Our Lady of the Wilderness." Due to the many pains and persecutions he faced in establishing the parish, however, he changed its title to "Notre Dame des Sept Doleurs"—Our Lady of Seven Dolors. With the removal of the Rev. David Lowry from his position in 1844, it looked for a time as if conditions would be more favorable for Father Cretin to carry on his work. The new Indian subagent recognized the priest's potentialities in serving the natives and nominated him as superintendent of the government school. Then occurred a clash between the backers of Father Cretin and the friends of the man favored by the government to fill the vacancy. In the bitter feud which ensued, the arbitrary governor of the territory refused to heed the reports of Father Cretin's competence and instead sent another Protestant minister to the post. The only hope left for the priest was to build a private school for the Catholic Indians some miles distant from that established by the government.

Between 1848 and 1849 the Indians were gradually being removed from the Fort Atkinson reservation, and for a time the end of the struggling little parish seemed inevitable. But simultaneous with the departure of the Winnebagoes came several families from Indiana who had migrated to this section of Iowa with the intention of organizing a Catholic colony. They immediately selected the "Old Mission" of Our Lady of Seven Dolours to serve as their chapel.

Twin Springs

For the next few years the church was serviced by only visiting missionaries. In 1854 calamity struck the settlement when the church was destroyed by an incendiary, instead of rebuilding on the same spot, a site known as "Twin Springs"— later officially changed to Festina was chosen as the place to erect a new building. Not until a year later, however, was the parish appointed a resident pastor, the Rev. Ph. Laurent. During the next twenty years the Rev. Louis DeCailly, the Rev. J. M. Flammang, and the Rev. Henry Feddermann were appointed in that order to the Festina parish. Such was the growth of Catholicity in this area that by 1861 when the Rev. Francis Hannasch assumed the pastorate a larger church was needed Father Hannasch at once began construction work and the present church was completed in 1863. A small nursery was also established at this time and entrusted Catholic lay teacher.

Pastors

Succeeding Father Hannasch to the ministry of Our Lady of Seven Dolours was the Rev. Conrad Schulte. After Father Schulte came the Rev. John Urbany, who built a parsonage for the priests and was instrumental in persuading the Sisters of St. Francis of La Crosse to take charge of the school.

On March 13, 1877, the Rev. Augustine Sauter began the 29 years of his pastorate at Festina. The addition of two brick veneer chapels at this time gave the church proper the aspect of a cross. In memory of his Silver Sacerdotal Jubilee, Father Sauter also built the Sacred Heart chapel on the cemetery grounds.

An unusual edifice was erected during this same period. The descendants of Joseph Huber and John Gaertner, two of the Catholic settlers who had migrated from Indiana in 1849, built a small stone chapel on the place where the original log church at the Old Mission had stood. The remains of the pioneers Gaertner and Huber lie in the shadow of this picturesque chapel dedicated to St. Anthony, which has become famous as the smallest church in America.

The pastorate of the Rev. A. Rubly, present pastor of the Festina Church, has been marked by various improvements, the most noteworthy of which was the erection of the new fire-proof school, opened in September, 1932.

According to the latest statistics published by the Rev. M. M. Hoffmann in his "Centennial History the Archdiocese of Dubuque," (1937), the Festina parish numbers 130 German-American Catholic families, not a single non-Catholic family being within its territorial confines. Nine boys from the parish have been ordained to the priest hood and thirty-five girls have joined the various Sisterhoods