

Preserving Our Past

As one looks back into the establishment of the Catholic Church in the city of Norwich, Saint Mary's, the first Roman Catholic Church built in 1850, was interestingly enough the predecessor of Saint Patrick Church, which was built in 1879. With the opening of what we now know as the Cathedral of Saint Patrick, Saint Mary's closed until 1898 when it was officially incorporated as the second parish in the city proper. At this time, Father Peter Kennedy, the Pastor of Saint Patrick's, was making plans to build a church in Norwichtown, where a wooden structure, known as the "Norwichtown Catholic Chapel," had been in use for about ten years. Reference to the original Norwichtown structure first appears in a deed written in July 16, 1879.



Father Christopher F. McCann

On Saturday, August 23, 1897, a grand celebration marked the laying of the cornerstone of Sacred Heart Church. So enthusiastic was the response of the Norwichtown faithful in having their church built that the completed beautiful new House of Worship was dedicated on October 10, 1898, with the celebration of the first Mass in the building. Recognizing the generosity of Mrs. Elizabeth Kearney, a plaque in her honor was placed in the church. She chose to have it dedicated to the "Sacred Heart," even though a Sacred Heart existed in neighboring Taftville. With the completion of the new church, the old wooden structure which had been used for services, was converted into a hall for the social gatherings of the congregation. For nearly four and a half years, Sacred Heart Mission was served by the priests of Saint Patrick Church, chiefly under the direction of the Pastor, Father Hugh Treanor. Over the years, due to the increase of worshippers, Sacred Heart of Norwichtown was given its own Pastor. Father Christopher F. McCann, previously of Colchester, was named Pastor. The Parish was incorporated on January 25, 1902. Deeds at that time verified that two parcels of land were purchased, including the house adjacent to the church, to provide a rectory

and the church proper. Father McCann worked assiduously to enhance the grounds and to provide a church that offered worshippers an inspiringly devotional atmosphere. Parish historical accounts illustrate: "The church in the bend of the road stood out like a jewel in its proper setting." Father McCann was able to secure an additional piece of property in 1910 with the vision of future expansion. For eleven years, this dedicated Pastor labored to provide the Sacred Heart community with a spirit of unity and enthusiasm. He worked diligently to prepare and train the youth of the parish in the ways of the Faith. The sadness of his transfer in April of 1913 was overshadowed by the fact that he was being promoted to a larger congregation at Saint Bridget's Church in Manchester.

Bringing to the parish his gifts of musical training and literary background, Father Charles W. Brennan was appointed Pastor on April 2, 1913. An outstanding spiritual leader, he quickly endeared himself to the members of the parish fami-



Father Charles W. Brennan

ly. Marion Marchand, whose family joined the parish in 1917, vividly recalls the stateliness of the man. She also reminisces that the old Church was quite different from what exists today: "The entrance was through a single door in the bell tower; a large stained glass window depicting the Good Shepherd occupied what we would today consider the church's main entrance. When one faced the front of the Church, one would see a large marble altar, with an angel resting on both sides of it." The disastrous Easter Sunday fire on April 1, 1923 quickly brought an end to the twenty-five year old Sacred Heart Church. Newspaper stories recounted: "Ten men from the Yantic Fire Engine Company, under the direction of Foreman Herman J. Gibbs quickly responded at 1:10 p.m., followed by a total complement of twenty-nine men. The City Department also arrived and after four hours the fire was declared under control." The church sustained considerable damage and the old wooden structure, "the Chapel," was completely destroyed.

Miss Marchand recounts: "When we came to see the church the next day, water that had been poured onto the fire now formed large icicles. From the back of the church, we could see the altar still standing on its foundation. It made an awesome impression on us who belonged to the church, even the young. The altar was stained by the fire and smoke--we later learned it could not be cleaned nor whitened, so it had to be stained to hid the damage from the fire. Needless to say, we could not use the church and a great deal of repair was in order, practically an entire rebuilding. Saint Patrick Parish offered us the use of the auditorium in the basement of their church in order that our parish family might continue to gather in prayer weekly with our Pastor, Father Brennan, thereby maintaining our parochial identity. The overwhelming generosity of the Norwich citizenry enabled Father Brennan to begin immediately the task of rebuilding. Just prior to Thanksgiving that year, we were again worshipping in our Norwichtown Church, although the repair process was far from complete."

Through the efforts of Father Brennan, beautiful German-made stained glass windows were imported from Bavaria and installed by Bavarian workmen. The main entrance to the church was relocated to the center of the building from the bell tower side and a new rose window was installed in the choir loft. As the repairs neared completion in November of 1926, Father Brennan was asked to assume the pastorate of Blessed Sacrament Church in Waterbury. Named third Pastor of Sacred Heart was Father Edward J. Quinn, whose simplicity of manner, exquisite taste and unaffected wisdom endeared him to the hearts of the people. For 10 1/2 years, Father Quinn labored to maintain the beauty of Sacred Heart Church, installing the two side altars in the Church and carefully grooming the property around the building. A deeply spiritual man, he distinguished himself by his pastoral care of the sick and shut-ins of the parish. Many of these were heartbroken to see him transferred to Saint Bernard's Church in Rockville in March of 1937.

On March 10, 1937, Father Michael F. Martin came to Norwichtown to serve as Sacred Heart's Pastor. With his easy-going mannerisms and genuine sincerity, he was not long in winning the hearts of his parishioners. This kindly, prayerful priest introduced the "Perpetual Novena in Honor of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal", not only to the parish, but to the entire neighboring area. For some thirty years on Monday evenings Sacred Heart Church was more often than not filled to capacity with worshippers. Marion Marchand states: "How well I remember this devotion. It was at this time I began my service as organist, which lasted for twenty-nine years until I had to relinquish my duties in order to provide care for my sister, Dora, who was ill with cancer. The weekly devotions always ended with hymn, 'Good Night Sweet Jesus,' during which the church lights were gradually extinguished, leaving the congregation to file out of the church in darkness and silence. A special trolley came from the city to bring worshippers and it waited near a little group of neighboring stores to bring its passengers back home."



Father Michael F. Martin

Through the efforts of Father Martin, religious sisters from Saint Mary's Parish organized and conducted the religious education program for the youth of the parish. Two special celebrations marked the ten year Pastorate of Father Martin: the Silver Jubilee of his Ordination and the Re-dedication of the church.

The latter ceremony evolved through his good stewardship which saw the payment of the debt incurred from the 1923 fire. On November 17, 1941, Bishop Maurice McAuliffe of Hartford led the list of church and civic dignitaries who gathered to celebrate this historic moment. Father Martin guided the flock through the frightening years of World War II and will be remembered for having the word 'Peace' placed in lights above the main church entrance as a sign of the congregation's prayer and as an invitation to all in those troubled times. Like his predecessors, Father Martin was asked to assume the responsibilities of a larger parish, that of Saint Francis Xavier in New Milford in June of 1946.



Father Francis J. Lawlor

Arriving on June 8, 1946 to assume his first pastorate, Father Francis J. Lawlor brought to Sacred Heart a great love for music, a gifted voice, and a creative artistic ability. Twenty-five of his forty-three years as a priest were shared with the people of Sacred Heart, with whom he celebrated the Golden Jubilee of the Parish in 1952 and his own Silver Jubilee of Ordination to the Priesthood in 1953. Early on in his pastorate, Father Lawlor came to be seen as a priest for the people, bringing

many into the Faith. Through his efforts, a much needed addition to the tiny rectory was constructed, providing a suitable Pastor's suite, below which a comfortable club-room for meetings and CYO functions was designed. Within a few years to meet the needs of a growing parish, extensive remodeling produced a parish hall beneath the church.

It was just about this time, August 6, 1953, that Pope Pius XII created the Diocese of Norwich and named Monsignor Bernard J. Flanagan of Burlington, Vermont as its first Bishop. Father Lawlor and the people of Sacred Heart delighted in being part of the fledgling diocese.

Great joy and pride came to Sacred Heart Parish on Thursday, May 10, 1956, when Bishop Flanagan officiated at the first ordination of a native son, Father Norbert E. Belliveau, in the Cathedral of Saint Patrick in Norwich. Three days later proud parents Edgar and Mary-Margaret (Ryan) Belliveau welcomed family, friends and fellow parishioners to Sacred Heart Church for the celebration of their son's first mass.

On July 1, 1960, then Norwich Bishop, Most Reverend Vincent Hines transferred from Colchester the pastoral responsibility of Saint John Mission in Fitchville to Sacred Heart Church in Norwichtown. Given the additional responsibilities for Father Lawlor, the Bishop thoughtfully assigned Father Henry J. Dziadosz of the Diocesan Marriage Tribunal to the status of a resident priest at Sacred Heart. Much of Father Dziadosz's three-year pastoral ministry was focused in Saint John's. With the reassignment of Father Dziadosz in September of 1963, Father Terence J. Murphy came to the parish as a resident priest for just over two years and he too assisted with much of the pastoral work at Saint John's. The spring of 1966 saw the arrival in Norwichtown of Father Daniel J. Cronin, the first full time assistant in the history of the parish. Father Cronin's duties included the direction of the parish religious education program and the updating of the parish census. His three years at Sacred Heart were ones of great encouragement and assistance to Father Lawlor.

The October 27, 1966, acquisition of a parcel of property adjoining the land on which Sacred Heart Church was built enabled Father Lawlor to provide a parking lot not only for those attending masses, but also for all who were participating in the increasing number of church-related activities in the parish hall. As the directives of the Second Vatican Council began to be promulgated by Pope Paul VI, parishioners of Sacred Heart, as those in most other communities began questioning the direction the Roman Catholic Church was beginning to take.

With the transfer of Father Cronin on September 2, 1969, a newly-ordained priest, Father Robert L. Brown, was assigned as the second full time assistant to come to Sacred Heart. He worked closely with Father Lawlor to renovate the sanctuaries both at Sacred Heart and Saint John's in order that they would conform to the liturgical norms of Vatican Council II; the tasks were completed by June of 1970. Soon after Father Brown's arrival, the Camillus Society was established to bring volunteers together to assist with the religious needs of the residents of the Norwichtown Convalescent Home. Among the initiatives introduced was the weekly celebration of mass at the Home--a practice which continues to this day. In September of 1970, religious education classes for the youth of the parish were transferred from the church hall to neighboring Samuel Huntington School.