

## OUR YEARS OF FAITH

### **Beginnings**

The first seeds of Catholicism were sown in western New York by a group of Jesuit missionaries who came to what is now Ontario County to bring the word of God to hostile Indians.

These zealous priests maintained a number of missions throughout the territory, keeping alive and spreading Faith among the Iroquois League of Indians. The Seneca tribes had villages throughout the Genesee Valley, and the site where Rochester now stands was decorated with wigwams. The Senecas and the Cayugas frequently moved into the country of the Hurons of northern Canada, carrying off captives who had been instructed in the Faith by French missionaries from Quebec.

The present town of East Bloomfield was once part of a village comprised entirely of such Canadian captives, and it was here that Father Fremin, a Jesuit, built a chapel and said the first Mass in November, 1668. Three years later another Jesuit missionary, Father James Pierron, became a resident priest in the Indian village of St. James, located in the present town of Victor, New York.

It was a small beginning for these men, but from this band of missionaries came rewards that were still to be harvested more than two hundred years later.

Prior to the year 1808, the Catholic Church in New York was under the direction of Archbishop Carroll of Baltimore. Then in 1808 the Most Reverend Luke Concanon was appointed the first Bishop of New York. The territory now comprising St. John Parish was under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of New York until 1847, when it became part of the newly established Diocese of Buffalo with the Most Reverend John Timon as Bishop.

It was during the episcopacy of Bishop Timon that New York State experienced a great influx of Irish immigrants who moved westward along the Erie Canal, increasing the Catholic population in an area that had a scarcity of priests to minister to their spiritual needs.

This scarcity figured in the early history of St. John Parish when, in 1851, the Reverend Bernard O'Reilly, rector of St Patrick's Church in Rochester, visited the town

of Ogden. While there, he was approached by James McDermott with a request that a priest be sent to the Catholic population.

The Bishop honored the request in the person of Father Michael Welch who came from Rochester and celebrated Mass in a wagon shop located at Ogden Center. A year later Father Fitzpatrick, also from Rochester, ministered to the needs of the Catholics in the same building which had been purchased by the town and renovated for use as a town hall.

For several years Mass continued to be held in the hall by visiting priests. Then in 1857 a small wooden chapel was erected on a hill east of the village. This humble house of God served as a spiritual haven for the people of Spencerport. By 1863 the chapel on Coleman Avenue near Spencerport Road could no longer accommodate the fast growing congregation. But it was not until 1867 that the cornerstone for a new church was laid on a plot of land donated by William Kinney, a trustee and parishioner.

The solemn ceremony was conducted by Reverend Richard Story, who became the first pastor of St. John's. These were the days following the Civil War. The South was experiencing the Reconstruction; Andrew Johnson was President of the United States; Pius IX was Pontiff. Life in 1867 was by necessity of the times confined to work, home, family and fellowship. So the Parish of St. John was born at a time when religion and its consequent rewards meant sacrifice on the part of both priest and parishioner. The first pastor was a man equal to such sacrifice. He proved a faithful shepherd to his flock for fifteen years, celebrating Mass, baptizing the young, burying the dead, comforting the ill and serving as trustee.

After Father Story's retirement as pastor of St. John's, father James Connelly became the first resident pastor and the rectory next to the old church was completed. Father Connelly dies a year later, leaving behind a legacy of devotedness that has passed on to all priests who have served our parish for the one hundred years of its existence.

St John's parish grew in numbers and by 1884 there were 501 people in the congregation, which by then had annexed St. Leo's in Hilton as an out-mission.

From 1897 until 1903 there was no resident pastor at Spencerport, but the parish was administered by priests from Rochester. For five years Father Andrew Breen, who was well-known for his oratory, faithfully served St. John's while residing at St. Bernard

Seminary. Other priests from the Seminary also administered the duties of the parish; among them were Father Eckel, Cowen, Cosgrove, Lapham, and Edelman.

### **A New Era**

The year 1903 marked the beginning of a new era for the parish with the appointment of Father John Kelly as pastor. During his pastorate the parishioners saw the erection of a new church, a true jewel of English-Gothic architecture. The cobblestones used in the church came from the farms of parishioners and much of the work in its reconstruction was performed by the parishioners themselves.

The first Mass in the new church was celebrated by the Most Reverend Thomas Hickey on November 21, 1915, just seven months after ground had been broken.

After fourteen years of zealous and faithful service, Father Kelly was transferred and Reverend James Winters was appointed pastor. It was during the pastorate of Father Winters that the church debt was notably reduced, side altars were installed and the rectory was redecorated and refurnished. Father Winters' death in 1926 brought grief to the entire community of St. John's who had come to love this personable priest of God.

### **The First School and Convent**

Reverend George Predmore came to St. John's as the new pastor. This was to be his first pastorate and he administered the affairs of the parish like a true shepherd. Under his aegis St. John's acquired its first parish school when, in 1927, the old church was converted into a school building. The services of St. Joseph were obtained, and in the fall of 1927 the school was opened with a registration of 106 pupils.

A home was purchased for the sisters in 1928 and the first superior to serve in the school was Sister Thomasina. She was succeeded by Sister Julia who served as superior until 1933. Our Sisters of St. Joseph have remained with us for forty years, instructing our children in the sound principles of Catholic education. Our present superior, Sister Joseph Andre de Mers, is carrying on the tradition of complete devotion to her charges established by Sister Thomasina.

The growing Parish of St. John took many important steps in the days following the opening of the school. Father Predmore had oil burners installed in the church, school, and rectory, and a new furnace was placed in the convent. As an authority on church music, Father Predmore was instrumental in organizing a chancel choir which consisted of men and boys of the parish. After several years of intense training his efforts bore fruit, for he had developed a very worthy liturgical choral group that received plaudits for its excellency.

In recognition of his outstanding work at St John's, Father Predmore was named successor to Father Philip Golding at Holy Apostles Church. The year was 1941 and Reverend Paul Gaffney, who had been chaplain at the state school in Industry for eleven years, was named pastor of our church.

Father Gaffney came to St. John's bent upon giving every measure of his energy in carrying on the work of his predecessors. But after a pastorate of only five months, his untimely death came as a shock to his parishioners who were just beginning to know the strong character of their new pastor. Even in the short span of time Father Gaffney served at St. John's, he had the convent and rectory redecorated, a new chapel opened for the sisters in the convent and St. Leo's Church in Hilton was painted.

At this time Reverend Emmett Magee was appointed pastor and for the next ten years he gave most generously of his life to St. John's.

These were the war years – years when St. John's was growing and maturing as a parish, ready to offer its sons in the service of their country, to defend their rights and liberties. A large number of men answered the call and not all returned, but the people of St. John's worked as their ancestors had done so many years before. They bought War Bonds, they worked with the Red Cross, they labored for the war effort in industry on the home front and in every branch of service overseas; all the while dedicating themselves to the cause of peace.

### **Our Diamond Jubilee**

It was on October 7, 1942, that St. John's commemorated the Diamond Jubilee of the parish. Priests, sisters, and parishioners joined with Father Predmore who had returned to offer Mass.

His Mass was one of thanksgiving to God for the spiritual and temporal blessings which had come to St. John's during the past seventy-five years. Father Predmore was assisted at Mass by Father Magee as deacon and father Horr as subdeacon. On that occasion a former assistant of St. John's, Reverend Ambrose Kavanaugh, preached the sermon, which in part told us as children of God that "the history of anything or anyone is like a mosaic. The art of mosaics seems to be a lost one...except...in the lives of men....For seventy-five years tiny pieces of history have been fitted together by a Divine Hand to create the Diamond Jubilee portrait that we see today....Not without a divinely guiding hand, nor without God's providential direction was this parish named St. John the Evangelist. For in it John is still writing...still writing his message of love...still exhorting all men to believe that Jesus is the Christ...still persuading men to have life in His Lord's name."

### **Years of Renewal**

Twenty-five years later, and one hundred years since our founding, these words still ring with truth and conviction. For we, as a community, have witnessed the hand of God in the course of our history – from the beginning, when the missionaries came to our land, until now, when our spiritual destiny is being guided by the knowledgeable minds of the Fathers of Vatican Council II. These Fathers, like St. John the Evangelist, have exhorted us to believe with renewed faith that "Jesus Christ is the true Christ."

The people of St. John's have a heritage of love and faith that is rare in today's fast-paced living. Our parishioners and religious adopted the new liturgy with the same vigor they displayed toward each and every change encountered through the years. The English-Gothic structure that is the church of St. John the Evangelist has weathered the years of progress like a proud fortress of faith, always ready to receive its people. True, the church interior has been renovated often, most recently in 1967. However, every alteration was made for the benefit of the parishioners. The most significant change in recent years has been the addition of the altar at which the priest offers Mass facing the congregation, enabling the people to become more intimate participants in the Mass. Our

services have surely become more meaningful to our daily lives because of this closer union between priest and people.

### **A Church of People**

A church, any church, is its people. And its success or failure to reach the people must depend on priest, religious and parishioner alike. In this respect, St. John's has been blessed with priests and sisters whose labor is one of love and with the parishioners whose generosity and devotion have never failed them in carrying their full responsibilities to make the parish a fruitful one.

### **Our New School**

This devotion has been rewarded with prosperity and growth through the years. The parishioners have never grown stagnant in the continuing stream of effort necessary to keep St. John Parish a live and active one. Our parish school, when opened in 1927, was adequate for the needs of the time. But by 1954 a new school was sorely required to house the fast-growing number of students. So the first major building task since 1915 fell to father Hester who had been appointed pastor in June, 1953. With a wonderful committee of men a capital fund drive was held to furnish money for the new school. \$120,000 was pledged and plans were drawn up for the school in 1955. Ground was broken on April 1, 1956, by the pastor and the school was dedicated by Bishop James E. Kearney on May 12, 1957. The school, a one-story building with eight classrooms, teachers' room, clinic room, cloak room and remedial reading room, is modern in every respect. Connected to the school itself is a large auditorium, capacity of four hundred, with a fully equipped kitchen. The auditorium serves as lunch room for the school children and a meeting place for the people of the parish.

### **A New Convent, Administration Center and Rectory**

Our Sisters, who have been so much a part of St. John's, are now housed in a Georgian convent which was built in 1963 at a cost of \$120,000, the appraised value of

which is \$200,000. The convent was built without a fund drive and was completely paid for within two years. The convent was built at such a low cost due to the generosity and help of many men and women in the parish and because the pastor, reverend Francis E. Hester, acted as general contractor.

The new administration center and rectory, begun in 1966, was completed under the supervision of Father Hester for the 1967 Centennial. The rectory is of English-Gothic architecture to complement the church. Again, there was no fund raising drive for its construction, which was awarded to the contracting firm of L.C. Jacobs, Inc. The architect was Mr. James Johnson.

Another important improvement was made possible by the removal of the old rectory: the parking lot was expanded to double its original size, accommodating twice as many cars for Sunday Masses and other functions.

### **Our Cemetery**

The land for our cemetery was purchased during the pastorate of Father Story in 1873. For almost one hundred years “God’s Little Acre” has been the final resting place of so many parishioners who made our parish possible. A new section of the cemetery was completed this year giving us room for an additional four hundred graves. Water has been piped to all sections of the cemetery and all roads improved in order to keep this holy spot as beautiful as possible. To achieve this goal Fred and Bernard Roach have worked tirelessly these past years and may God bless them for their care of the “silent city of the dead.”

### **Workers in the Vineyard**

The man responsible for so many parish improvements is our present pastor of St. John’s, Reverend Francis E. Hester. Father Hester was born in Auburn, New York, and educated at Auburn High School, St. Andrew and St. Bernard Seminaries. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1935 by the late Cardinal Mooney and appointed pastor of St. John the Evangelist Church in 1953, succeeding Reverend Alphonsus Crimmens.

A dynamic personality and tireless worker, Father Hester has been a most capable administrator. But even more important is his love for the people of the parish which is evident by his intense concern for the holiness and happiness of the families of St. John's.

No church history would be completed without mention of the assistants who have labored in the vineyard of the Lord. The early years of St. John's found the church ministered to by only the pastor. After continuing growth demanded more pastoral assistance, priests were called in to help on Saturdays, Sundays and Holy days. Among the early priests who served in this capacity were Fathers Edward Meegher, William Brien, F. Marks and J. Duffy.

The Reverend Ambrose Kavanaugh was the first regular assistant pastor of St. John Church. A native of Rochester, he was ordained in 1933 and was appointed assistant in the parish the same year. Father Kavanaugh is remembered by many for his devoted attention to the sick and his enthusiastic support of all parish functions. In the confessional and in the pulpit, he strove for the spiritual betterment of the people he served.

Numerous young men and women of the parish have entered the service of God as priests, brothers, and sisters. The first young man from the parish to be ordained to the priesthood was James Kiernan. His ordination took place on July 9, 1882, at Troy, New York, and he sang his first Solemn Mass on July 12 in the old church. Father Kiernan later became Rector of the Cathedral and Vicar General of the Diocese.

St John Parish is justly proud of its sons and daughters who are carrying on the tradition of faith and service that is so much an integral part of the lives of those whom they serve, whether they labor as teachers, parish priests, hospital workers or in homes for the aged.

### **A True Community of God**

Spencerport, New York, once the home of the hostile Indians, is today a prosperous residential community in the town of Ogden. From this and neighboring townships some 2,000 persons worship in the Church of St. John the Evangelist in this centennial year of 1967. Insignificant, perhaps, when one considers the overall

community of the Roman Catholic Church. But the fact becomes most significant when confined to the everyday living that is so much a part of St. John Parish.

Our parish societies bear witness to this. From the beginning the societies have played an important role in the social and ceremonial functions of the parish. The members give generously of their time and efforts with regard to all parish programs as well as the lively social activities that have made St. John's a center of good fellowship.

Too, St. John's has had the good fortune to have as lay trustees men who were determined to do all in their power for the betterment of the parish. They worked side-by-side with the priests who labor here in every undertaking that would add to the material side of the parochial plant.

The contribution that the lay trustee men have made and are making is written not only in the long and glorious history of the parish of St. John the Evangelist, but also in the Book of Life. These are the men who are the backbone of a church and parish. Men of strong faith and convictions who give unstintingly of their time with service and devotion to Christ and his Church.

Pope Pius XII, in a papal encyclical, told us that "Along with the Church...her divine Founder is present at every liturgical function: Christ is present at the august sacrifice of the Mass both in the person of His minister and above all under the Eucharist species. He is present in the sacraments, infusing into them the power which makes them ready instruments of sanctification. He is present finally in the prayer of praise and petition we direct to God, as it is written: 'Where there are two or three gathered together in My Name, there I am in the midst of them'. The sacred liturgy is consequently the public worship which our Redeemer as Head of the Church renders to the Father as well as the worship which the community of the faithful renders to its Founder, and through Him to the Heavenly father. It is, in short, the worship rendered by the Mystical Body of Christ in the entirety of its Head and members...."

We, as members of His Holy Catholic Church and as members of His house of worship, St. John's, are made to feel a part of the holy pattern that is the fabric of Christ. For one hundred years that fabric has been carefully and lovingly woven by our priests in their role as His ministers.

Ever ready to sacrifice of themselves for the good of the Catholic community, our priests have been the bulwark of the long journey from the wagon shop in Ogden Center to our joyous centennial year of 1967. The years have been kind to the church of St. John. Our roots are firmly implanted here in Spencerport, and we have shown our gratitude to God for His generosity in many ways. What better way then, than to celebrate a centennial anniversary with temporal as well as religious ceremonies.

### **Our Centennial**

St John the Evangelist Parish's celebration of its centennial encompassed these factors to include all parish members, young and old. Events, social and religious, were joyfully planned weeks in advance of the opening centennial event which took place on September 29, when all the high school students of the parish attended Holy Mass, celebrated by the pastor, Father Hester. Following the Mass the high-schoolers adjourned to the school auditorium for a pizza dinner and dancing. On the next afternoon all the school children in grades one through four met in the auditorium for movies and refreshments. A five-thirty Mass was celebrated by Father Hester for the parish children in grades five through eight. Again, refreshments and dancing were held in the school auditorium as a fitting climax to the young people's part in the centennial. Every child attending these parties was given a commemorative souvenir of the centennial which we hope will be in their possession for many years.

On October 3, the parishioners attended Mass for the deceased members of the parish, a solemn moment in the round of festivities to remember those who did so much to make St. John's what it is and to remember, too, that those who have gone before us left us a legacy that must not be neglected.

Thursday, October 5, was a happy day and an unusual one, with a special Mass for all the married couples, especially those celebrating anniversaries divisible by five. Most solemn and beautiful was the renewal of the marriage vows at this time...and the joy of the many couples attending the Mass gave strong evidence that these marriages were deeply rooted in love based on sacrifice.

Culmination of the days of the activities came on Sunday, October 8. On that day St. John's Centennial Mass was celebrated at 12:30 in the afternoon by the priest who has done so much for our parish, Father Francis E. Hester.

Sunday evening was one never to be forgotten by the parish. A centennial Dinner dance at the Party house on Beahon Road brought out a capacity crowd of five hundred people, which included state, town, and village officers as well as priests and sisters who served at St. John's.

The centennial was a resounding success. This was due to the wonderful cooperation of so many of our parishioners and especially the untiring efforts of the centennial committee.