

The Catholic Heritage of our River City: **Celebrating our Diocesan Sesquicentennial Anniversary 2018**

By: Amy Eichsteadt

“The history of the spread of the Catholic faith in the state of Wisconsin is magnificent and mundane, sad and jubilant... Sometimes [the efforts of the Faithful] met with success, sometimes with failure, but with God as their anchor they gave us what we have today. Native Americans and immigrants planned and begged, built and rebuilt, sacrificed and reaped, lived and died for the freedom to practice our faith in a country filled with vision, responsibility, and hope. The Diocese of La Crosse, formed out of the western side of Wisconsin, is now celebrating 150 years. We are the beneficiaries of our ancestors’ labor and whether we realize it or not, we enjoy the fruits of their work.”

-Feed my Lambs: Diocese of La Crosse Sesquicentennial anniversary book. 2017.

In this our Diocese’s 150th year, our Bishop, William Patrick Callahan, has dedicated much of his schedule to celebrating with the faithful this momentous occasion. He will be visiting our Wisconsin Rapids Deanery on April 6-7, with events highlighting our local faith journey.

Wisconsin Rapids Deanery Parishes

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| -Saints Peter and Paul, Wisconsin Rapids | -St. Lawrence, Wisconsin Rapids |
| -St. Philip, Rudolph | - St. James, Vesper |
| -St. Joachim, Pittsville | -St. Alexander, Port Edwards |
| -Holy Rosary, Siegel | -Our Lady Queen of Heaven, Wisconsin Rapids |
| -St. Joseph’s, Adams-Friendship | -St. Vincent de Paul, Wisconsin Rapids |
| -Sacred Heart, Nekoosa | |

With 150 years behind us, it seems only fitting that we look back from where we came and to what got us here.

Only thirty years after the first European explorer, Jean Nicolet, reached Wisconsin shores, the first missionary, Jesuit priest Fr. Rene Menard, came in 1661. He was seeking to reach a band of starving Huron Indians, but Father Menard never returned from his mission, perishing into the wilderness. His coming, however, was just the beginning of a long line of missionaries, many familiar: Fr. Allouez, Fr. Baraga, Fr. Hennepin, men who each won many souls and are the namesakes for places throughout the Midwest. These brave men were sent to bring the faith into this uncharted wilderness we now call Wisconsin.

Nearly 200 years later, European settlers began making their way into the territory. The mid 1830’s brought the English and Irish founders of Grand Rapids west from New York. They were “attracted by the newly discovered and apparently limitless forests bordering the Wisconsin River,” claims *A Short History of Wisconsin Rapids*. Meanwhile, directly across the river, a second group of founders—French-

Canadians who had piloted logs down the waterway, abandoned the trade and set up the town of Centralia.

It was during those early days of settlement that the men, brave or crazy enough to bring their families into the wilds of the Wisconsin River timber settlements, were seeking not just a livelihood but also a life. Part of which included practicing their faith. So, long before the Catholic Diocese of La Crosse was established, even before Wisconsin attained statehood, our local Catholic story began.

In 1837, the first Mass was said on the west side of town called "Centralia". Fr. Van Den Broeck of Green Bay had traveled by horseback and then canoe with his portable altar stone to minister to the Catholics of the area, followed by priests from various other areas of the state. According to a June 19, 1925 *Wisconsin Rapids Tribune* article, "'Roman Catholic' was the first church established in Wisconsin Rapids". And according to parish archives, "The history of Catholicism in Central Wisconsin parallels, to a large extent, the history of Saints Peter and Paul's Parish... in Wisconsin Rapids. It is the mother parish of the Catholic community."

"In the frontier community, there was no 'parish' in the modern sense," recalls an early Grand Rapids resident as quoted in Dave Engel's *The Fat Memoirs*, based on historic *Daily Tribune* articles. In the early years, Mass was said in families' log cabins and private homes until 1854 when a 20X30 frame church was built on the corner of Third Avenue and Jackson Street. The small structure would only serve for three years before it was destroyed by a fire caused by dry evergreen trimmings used to decorate the church in 1857.

The Catholic community needed a new home. By this time the Catholic population had grown rapidly on the east side of the river known as Grand Rapids. A new east side location was selected for the church on Second Street North, the land for which was donated by Mr. Francis Biron.

With the building of a new church, the mission of Grand Rapids now became a parish with a resident pastor. Saints Peter and Paul (SSPP) Church was finished in 1859, but in less than ten years, the congregation was overflowing capacity, so again a new church building was begun. It took considerable efforts over the next several years for the congregation and its frequently-changing pastoral leadership to complete the project. The dedication was finally held in 1873. The 1859 church was moved and the new structure served for nearly eighty years.

Saints Peter and Paul Congregation in Grand Rapids was first part of the Diocese of Milwaukee which encompassed the entirety of the newly-formed state of Wisconsin. But as the Catholic population of the state steadily grew, more localized leadership became a necessity and in 1868 the Dioceses of La Crosse and Green Bay were established, dividing the state into three dioceses. But it wasn't until 1905 that Grand Rapids became a part of the Diocese of La Crosse, when Wisconsin added a fourth diocese—that of Superior—and boundaries were once again shifted.

Two years after its completion, SSPP was struck by lightning in 1875, causing significant damage. But such setbacks did nothing to slow the growth and organization of the faithful in the area. Restoration was done and in 1878, SSPP Pastor, Rev. P. Pernin, at the request of Bishop Michael Heiss of La Crosse, was given charge of the Catholic community in Rudolph.

Pernin had St. Philomena Parish constructed as a mission of SSPP, since members of the congregation had previously traveled to the Wisconsin Rapids Parish to attend Mass. As numbers of Faithful in

Rudolph increased, they needed a church of their own. St. Philomena's received its first resident pastor, Fr. August Van Sever, in 1884. One year after his arrival he opened a Catholic school, which he had staffed by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. SSPP quickly followed suit and opened its own Catholic school in 1886 in its renovated rectory.

When the old parish buildings in Rudolph became inadequate some years later, the plan was to contain the church, rectory, school and convent under one roof. A plot of land located closer to the downtown was secured and the megastructure was completed in 1921.

St. Joachim's of Pittsville was also started as a mission of SSPP when Fr. Beyerle began to minister to the area in 1879, followed by Van Sever of Rudolph. The Pittsville congregation constructed its mission church in 1887 and welcomed its first resident Pastor, newly-ordained Fr. Willitzer, in 1908. Willitzer was somewhat of a legend in Pittsville, having served the parish and several rural missions for 38 years until his death in 1946. His transportation to the missions was by horseback in the cold Wisconsin winters, and his big travel gloves remain at the Pittsville Historical Museum as an ode to his service and dedication to his flock. One of Fr. Willitzer's missions became St. James Congregation in Vesper, building a church for themselves in 1910.

Catholics of the Sigel area attended church services at either SSPP or Rudolph until their numbers warranted the building of a church in 1882. The congregation was first ministered to by a priest from Independence who came by train to Centralia each month to minister to the Polish Catholics (who would later form St. Lawrence Parish,) and then from Centralia to Sigel to minister there. The community established a parish school in 1883, making it the first in the area, but it only served until 1913, by which time many farmers and their families moved closer to the city. Since its founding, the parish has been served at times by resident pastors but more often as a mission of other local parishes.

The turn of the century brought much change to the area. Our two river cities of Centralia and Grand Rapids, which had grown up side by side with little in common, adopted as one the name "Grand Rapids," and later "Wisconsin Rapids". The same year two new Catholic parishes were established in our area. Fr. Van Sever of Rudolph founded Sacred Heart Parish in Nekoosa as a mission, and St. Lawrence Parish on the west side of Wisconsin Rapids was formed when a group of 33 Polish Catholic families decided that their "spiritual needs would be [better] served by a parish of their own, using their mother language," reads *Feed my Lambs*.

Sacred Heart was quickly organized and within a year was built and received a resident pastor, Fr. Joseph Feldman, who served until his death in 1927. By 1930, attendance necessitated a new church, which still serves the parish today.

The St. Lawrence congregation constructed and dedicated its Parish in 1904. Both the St. Lawrence and Sacred Heart congregations added parochial schools to their properties shortly after construction, which were staffed by the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi from Milwaukee.

In 1914, the St. Lawrence property was destroyed by a fire. A new building was constructed, first to house the church temporarily and then in 1931 when a new church could be built, the former became the school.

Interestingly, Fr. Feldman of Nekoosa recognized a growing Catholic population in nearby Port Edwards and held Masses in a public building there from 1908-1910. But with the construction of the interurban

street car line between Wisconsin Rapids and Nekoosa in 1910, the services were discontinued and Port Edwards Catholics took the street car to Nekoosa for Mass. But when the interurban service line was abandoned in 1930, the "Porters" developed a strong interest in forming their own parish. Bishop McGavick of La Crosse gave his permission and the new parish, St. Alexander's, was built and dedicated in June 1942.

In the late 1940's, World War II was ended and most young men had returned and were beginning their families. This time was known as the "baby boom". In Wisconsin Rapids, life was no different. SSPP was bursting at the seams. There was an urgent need for more space, especially to accommodate the growing numbers of Catholic school children. The SSPP school, which had been built in 1895 and expanded twice could simply not house all of the Catholic school-age children in Wisconsin Rapids.

Under the direction of Bishop Treacy, Fr. Joseph Tetzlaff founded Our Lady Queen of Heaven Parish in 1947 for the 200 or so families who resided on the west side of town. The property chosen and purchased for the church and school was previously the pastureland for the large Nels Johnson house on First Avenue. The school was built first, welcoming students in 1949. Often called "St. Mary's," the church was completed in 1951, before which OLQH Masses were held at the Wisconsin Theatre on Grand Avenue.

A short five years later, the need for classroom space for Catholic elementary school children continued to necessitate further expansion for the Wisconsin Rapids Catholic community. In 1956, Bishop Treacy (sometimes called "the building bishop,") announced to Fr. Dockendorff, associate pastor of SSPP, that a new parish, under the patronage of St. Vincent de Paul, would be built on Wisconsin Rapid's upper eastside. Again, the first building project was the school. Masses were held at the newly-constructed Assumption High School gym until St. Vincent's congregation completed its auditorium/gymnasium to be used temporarily for church services. The space became the permanent worship space in 1981 when a new gym was built.

Catholic Education was and still is a cornerstone of the life of the Church. Many families underwent great sacrifice to ensure their children were afforded a parochial education. The "baby boom" years saw peak numbers throughout the Catholic schools in the area, with St. Vincent's at over 500 students and SSPP at over 700 elementary students. QLQH, St. Lawrence, St. Phillips, Sacred Heart and St. Joachim's each served many hundreds more.

To give opportunity for a parochial secondary education, two area Catholic high schools were established: Maryheart High School in Pittsville in 1948 and Tri-City Catholic High School (later to be re-named Assumption High School [AHS] in honor of the proclamation of the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin into heaven) in 1951. The first classes of AHS met on the second floor of the new OLQH school until 1954 when the new high school was complete. The property donated for AHS was originally part of the Isaac Witter Farm. The structure's architect was A.F. Billmeyer and Son, Catholic Parishioners at SSPP who also designed OLQH, St. Vincent's and the new SSPP Church among many other notable local buildings. Assumption contains three-stories, two of which are classrooms, and a third-floor convent was used originally for the teaching nuns.

Today, in response to enrollment levels, student needs, and budget mandates, the area Catholic schools, called "Assumption Catholic Schools," have been consolidated into a cohesive system and reconfigured. St. Lawrence School now houses an Early Childhood Program from six weeks to pre-K as

well as being a host site for a WRPS 4-year-old Kindergarten program. Students in K-2 are served at the Our Lady Queen of Heaven site. St. Vincent de Paul school houses grades 3-5. Assumption Middle School, which serves grades 6-8 and Assumption High School, grades 9-12, are located in the Assumption building.

Throughout the deanery as new parishes and schools sprung up, the older congregations were continuing to manage the significant rise in numbers. Many churches required expansion or new structures altogether. In 1950, the present, magnificent, SSPP Church building was constructed and St. Philomena's was ready to move their worship space from the basement of the school building into a proper church structure. In 1950, they too completed construction of a new church and rectory. In 1977, St. Joachim's Parish was demolished and a new parish constructed on the same site the following year. St. James underwent a large expansion in 1979 as well.

Our congregations continue to respond to the new and ever-changing needs of their people. As the baby boomers age, many of the area parishes have undergone extensive renovations to make them more accessible. In some cases, the buildings were given face-lifts in the process, and in others, major restorations, within the last ten years. In all cases, parishes have spaces for worship and fellowship that they can be proud of.

The one deanery parish not yet mentioned is St. Joseph's in Adams/Friendship which does not have ties, like all the others, to SSPP. Its history began in the 1880's when Fr. Schwartzmeyer who was serving the parish in nearby Briggsville came to serve the Friendship area by horseback, buggy and open sled. He helped erect a parish church in 1884. The new parish, called St. Leo's, was tended by priests from Plover and Necedah until receiving its first resident pastor in 1916.

From Past to Present: The History of Adams County relates the following: "About 1910, the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad began building its shops and roundhouse a mile south of Friendship. A fair-sized town called, Adams, developed. The railroad brought new Catholics to town and Mass was offered in a large hall... When the two congregations merged in Adams, the parish was named St. Joseph's". The church was constructed in 1926.

Then the building of two large man-made lakes in the 1940's, namely Castle Rock and Petenwell, caused St. Joseph's to become crowded with seasonal visitors. After many additions and renovations over the years and summer months of holding Masses in the parish hall, a new church was completed in 2005.

Within each deanery parish, various service opportunities exist to reach out to the many demographics of our local community through prayers, financial contributions and volunteerism. Groups such as the Knights of Columbus, Catholic Scouting, Parish Councils of Catholic Women, Men's, Senior's, Youth and Young Adult groups provide community service as well as social opportunities for their members. Support groups are offered, as well as ample educational opportunities for every age.

Many parishes have relationships with "sister parishes" overseas, fundraising, providing prayer support and even serving there in mission capacity.

The Marian Center for Peace, located in the old convent on SSPP grounds houses a Perpetual Adoration Chapel where "our Eucharist Lord is continually adored by members of the Wisconsin Rapids community," reads its website description. The center is maintained by a group who seek to serve

through prayer, study and evangelization, holding several deanery events each year to celebrate special liturgical feasts.

One more contribution in Wisconsin that is uniquely attributed to Catholics is the fish fry. According to the Wisconsin State Historical society, “Early German Catholic settlers in Wisconsin made use of the region’s abundant supply of fish because they were prohibited from eating meat on Fridays.” The tradition continues today, in circles far beyond the Church. Throughout the state, people enjoy their fish and all the fixings on Fridays as an inexpensive meal to welcome the weekend. Several area parishes, most notably St. Lawrence and Sacred Heart, have a long tradition of serving Lenten Fish Frys—delicious food with a side of community camaraderie.

One last highlight, unique to our deanery, to our diocese and quite unique the world over, is our beloved Grotto Shrine in Rudolph, the history of which is as beautiful as the lush gardens that surround St. Phillips during the summer months.

According to the Rudolph Grotto website, “The Grotto was built as a fulfillment of a promise made by Father Philip Wagner while studying for the priesthood in Europe in 1912. With seriously failing health, Father visited Our Lady’s Shrine in Lourdes, France (well known for healing) and promised to Mary that, if his health were to be restored allowing him to be ordained, he would build a shrine in her honor someday. His condition slowly improved and as his strength returned, his courage revived. He came to realize that many would never have the opportunity to journey to places of spiritual importance, and it was in this realization that the beginnings of the Grotto were formed.”

When Fr. Wagner was assigned to St. Philomena’s church in 1917, he saw the parish ground and rolling Rudolph countryside and knew— “This was it—the place I was looking for, where my dreams were to be realized,” he shared in an autobiography.

Even with no background in construction or design, Wagner began his first shrine in 1927. The following year 12-year-old neighbor Edmund Rybicki began helping with the project and continued throughout Wagner’s life and tenure in Rudolph, where he died in 1959. Rybicki continued with construction until the last project was completed in the spring of 1983. In 1961, the St. Philomena’s Church was rededicated and given the name St. Philip the Apostle after Fr. Wagner.

“Over the years, thousands of tons of rock were hauled from local farms and used to create the Shrines and unique formations that make up the grotto. The Wonder Cave is a one-fifth mile passageway featuring 26 shrines and was patterned after the catacombs in Rome. The hand-carved plaques and statues were made from the finest marble in the world in Carrara, Italy, to the exact specifications of Father Wagner. A variety of shells, marbles, tiles and colored glass all give the Grotto its unique appearance,” reads the Grotto’s website.

A visit to the Grotto is a peaceful and prayerful experience. The gardens surround towering shrines and winding walkways, promising surprises around each corner. The site is steeped in the hard-working history and faith of a small town and the devotion of one man.

Looking back through the annals of local history, all the dates, the names, the accomplishments, the service, and the sacrifices of our people, it is impossible to quantify or summate the effects our Catholic Church has had on our community. It ripples into all areas of society: political, economic, biographical, social, intellectual, cultural.

The legacy of our deanery within the wider Universal Church is not about all of the buildings nor even the history it represents, but rather it is about giving glory to God, our creator, for the great blessing of faith that has endured. But when we do take the time to “admire the stately buildings of our congregation, we should think of the fortitude and loyalty of those early members who made these things possible and left us such a splendid heritage,” reflects the author in a 1914 *Wood County Reporter* article covering the 60th anniversary of SSPP. Because “to have remained a faithful Catholic in those early days, when the opportunities for practicing his religion were few, is a tribute, indeed, to him who kept the faith.”

To celebrate that faith, we cordially invite you to be a part of the deanery-celebration of our Sesquicentennial at the following events:

April 6th at 1:30 p.m.—dedication of the new welcome center at the Grotto Shrine in Rudolph

April 7th at 9:30 a.m. – Mass with Bishop William Callahan at SSPP Parish