

FROM THE PASTOR'S PRINTER

A Sporadic Series on the History of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati as We Celebrate 200 Years - Part II-b

Bishop Purcell served the diocese from 1833-1883, and a lot happened during his tenure. This growth did not happen in a Catholic vacuum, and both within the Church and outside of it, challenges were present and met both successfully, unsuccessfully, and somewhere in between.

CATHOLICS IN A NON-CATHOLIC LAND

While on paper (namely, the Constitution of the United States) America had freedom of religion, it was not necessarily so in practice. Our founding fathers and mothers were largely from Protestant denominations, and the animosity of the Reformation had not died down on either side. Established Americans feared the immigrant Catholics were filled with superstition, heresy, and unbridled allegiance to the Pope, not simply in matters of faith and morals, but also in the (what now seems preposterous) plot of the Pope to take over America. Catholicism had a more overt culture and worldview differing from the Protestant mores. Add to this that these Catholics were from non-English speaking nations, poor, and often unrefined by the standards of the day, xenophobia against Catholics and immigrants waxed and waned during this time.

The Catholic Church in America was considered to be a missionary Church, not only with the task of evangelizing native peoples, but with the task of nurturing the faith of newly arrived immigrants (i.e., for most of us, our ancestors). The latter was mainly the mission in the diocese of Cincinnati since significant Native American populations no longer existed in this area. America was a quite different place than where they came from, and not having a Catholic culture, could easily lead these people away from the Catholic faith.

It was important, therefore, that Catholic parishes be established where these immigrants would not simply maintain the faith of the old country, but live it in the new country where society and government functioned in different ways than on the old sod. As immigrant groups settled—often by nationality—in areas of cities or in rural areas and parishes came into existence, the parishes functioned in the language and culture of the newcomers. To meet these needs, there were often several parishes in a neighborhood to serve the communities. For example, in Northside, a neighborhood in Cincinnati, there were St. Boniface Church for the Germans and St. Patrick Church for the Irish. (Until St. Boniface moved to the present location, the parishes shared a common property line. It is

said that the only interaction between the two parishes was for confessions, because the Germans would go to St. Pat's and confess in German and the Irish to St. Boniface to confess in English to priests who did not know the language.) These parishes were not established as nationality parishes, but simply as neighborhood parishes to meet the current situation. This not only served to meet the cultural needs, but also to keep peace between groups. In addition to the sacramental and devotional life of the parish, there were confraternities and societies under the patronage of Christ, Mary, or for a particular cause that fostered a sense of belonging and welcome to these "wanderers in a strange land." Often immigrants came with a weak faith and in these parishes grew strong in it. The parish often became almost the total social world of its members. In a nation of the 19th century in which Catholics were seen as an oddity at best, and people to be terrorized at worse, the parish was a place of acceptance with a life and afterlife familiar to them. It should not be assumed, however, that just because the parish was the focal point of social life that everyone was saintly. Good and bad make up the Church and good and bad are part of every person's life. Lest we think every parish was just a different flavor of the same ice cream, we have to recognize that the wider social context in which the parish existed contributed greatly to what the parish was like. In a small town that was not predominately Catholic, the difference in parish life might well be determined by the attitude of the town folk to the Catholic faith. In Sidney, Ohio, the Catholic church was bombed by anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant people, but non-Catholics contributed to a new church. In Loveland, the Ku Klux Klan burnt a cross in front of the church. In some places, especially in the northern part of our diocese, everyone in the town was Catholic. There were many blessings in Catholic parish life, but also some drawbacks. Pride in being a Catholic, in itself a good thing, could also lead to a sense that Catholics are better than everyone else and to a *we against them* attitude in relationship to the wider society. Bigotry between Catholics and non-Catholics ran both ways, with refreshingly occasional unity and accord between Catholics and others. In general, the parish helped society by giving their members an anchor and formation in the faith that facilitated responsible citizenship. Catholic immigrants became good American citizens, serving in government and military service, as we see in the Civil War.