



It is important to recall some dramatic situations during our celebration of the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the Diocese of La Crosse. This true story highlights the courage and faithfulness of one of our priests, who because of his love and commitment to Jesus Christ and His Church, stood against the Ku Klux Klan.

Peter Minwegen was born in Germany in 1881. He joined the order of Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and was ordained a priest in 1907. In 1908, he was given his first missionary assignment with the native peoples in the north woods of Saskatchewan, Canada where he spent seven years. When World War I broke out, Germans in Canada were considered “unwelcome aliens” and feared being placed in concentration camps. Because of the war, German priests were cut off from their religious superiors in Europe and had to carry on as best they could where they had been stationed. The Bishops of the United States considered them war victims and priests in good standing and therefore welcomed them. Father Minwegen was accepted by Bishop Schwebach in the Diocese of La Crosse, who was delighted to learn that the Oblates accepted difficult missions and did pioneer work. Father Minwegen was assigned just such a place—Cornell, Wisconsin. Cornell was a predominately Protestant town located on the Chippewa River. For the most part, the town was sustained by a paper mill, and the president of the paper mill supported

Relationship with GOD

More than Just SUNDAY

Defending the Catholic Faith against the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)

the Presbyterian minister. There was no Catholic church in town for the 30 Catholic families, and they had not been served by a priest in many years. Unfortunately, anti-Catholic sentiment was rampant, and Father Minwegen was not welcome. Undaunted, he gathered his small congregation and offered Mass in cabins, theaters, halls, barns, drugstores. Despite the continued harassment of some Protestants and suspicion that he might be a German spy, Father continued to lead his congregation in faith and against discrimination. His greatest challenge was the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).

The Klan has promoted extremist positions such as white supremacy, white nationalism, anti-immigration and anti-Catholicism. Worst of all, the KKK has used terrorism—including murder—against groups or individuals whom they opposed and they have supported the “purification” of American society. Around the 1920’s, the KKK adamantly stood against the Catholic Church due to the high immigration from the mostly Catholic nations of central and southern Europe.

By 1924 the Ku Klux Klan was very active in Cornell, marching up Main St. with their hoods, masks and torches whenever the priest came to town. Cornell was already fertile ground for their beliefs, and many of the town’s officials, the mill’s administrators, public school teachers, and others of influence became ardent members of the Klan. It wasn’t long before the Klan had broad enough support to hold their meetings openly. They spread hatred and

lies, trying to provoke the Catholics to take the first violent step. Father Minwegen urged adults and children to respond calmly to intimidation at work or at school. But when the teachers in the public schools began to bring the KKK’s lies to the classroom, Father had had enough. He went to Chicago to meet with the president of the paper mill. The president dispatched detectives to report back to him on the Klan activity, and as a result, several employees at the mill were fired. The editor of the local paper was also fired. Anger erupted in the town when it became known that it was Father Minwegen who had informed the president of the mill about the Klan activity. Threats were made against Father, and there were plans to expel him from the town. Calling him a “black robed devil,” the Klan burned a cross in an empty plot of land across from the priest’s residence. Rather than fleeing in fear, Father Minwegen prayed, trusted in God and defended the Catholic Faith with incredible courage. Learning that the option to buy that very plot of land had expired for the school board, Father Minwegen made a fifty-dollar payment for the ten acres. Eventually, on the very place where white crosses had been burned as a sign of ignorance, hatred and violence, Holy Cross Catholic Church was built as a sign of faith, hope and charity. Let us be grateful for our forebearers and seek to imitate their unshakeable courage to spread and defend what is true and good – our faith in Jesus Christ and His Church.

Adapted by Ann Lankford from “Feed My Lambs,” a pictorial history of the parishes of the Diocese of La Crosse. Books may be purchased at your parish.

