

Relationship with GOD

More than Just SUNDAY

Glimpses of the past – 150th Anniversary of the Diocese of La Crosse begins

As the 150th anniversary of the diocese gets underway March 3-4 with special Masses celebrated by Bishop Callahan in Prairie du Chien, what follows are a few “snapshots” from our colorful history. They are condensed and adapted from “Feed my Lambs,” the official book on 150 years of Catholic life in the Diocese of La Crosse, available in parishes (\$35).

An Age of Adventure, Danger and Holy Mission

Flash back for a moment to a virgin land with no cities or towns, a land of prairies, bluffs, rivers and woods. First traversed only by Native American tribes, this land, including present-day Wisconsin, would in the early 1600's begin to see European (mostly French) explorers, fur trappers and Jesuit missionary priests.

The first Mass in what is today Wisconsin was celebrated by Jesuit Fr. René Menard in August of 1660. A missionary to the Huron tribe, Fr. Menard was accompanying a group of traders. To give an idea of the perils of the time, he became separated from his traveling party at one point and was never seen again. His breviary and cassock turned up years later among the Sioux, who treasured these relics of the priest.

Twelve years later, Fr. Jacques Marquette, S.J. and fur trader Louis Jolliet passed through present-day Wisconsin as they went in search of a great river the native peoples of Illinois called “Messipi,” a river that was said to empty into the sea. Fr. Marquette wrote in his diary:

The joy that we felt at being selected for this expedition animated our courage, and rendered the labor of paddling from morning to night agreeable to us.... Above all, I placed our voyage under the protection of the Blessed Virgin Immaculate.

On June 17, 1673, led down the Wisconsin River by native guides, Jolliet and Fr. Marquette at last came upon the great river, the “Messipi.” Of course, today we know it by a slightly longer name – the Mississippi.



An Italian Priest in Prairie du Chien

By the late 1600's, a strong missionary foundation had been laid in present-day Wisconsin, but hostilities and wars disrupted it. In 1728 the last missionary priest was recalled to French Canada, thus beginning a hundred-year period without priests.

The Faith persisted among Native American converts and European immigrants, however, and finally in 1827 an area that included Prairie du Chien – a key town along the fur trading route – began to be visited by itinerant priests on horseback, known as the “clergy cavalry.”

Then in 1827, a young Italian Dominican priest by the name of Carlo Gaetano Samuele Mazzuchelli was recruited as a missionary to the northern Mississippi region by Bishop Edward Fenwick of the newly

established Diocese of Cincinnati. Fr. Mazzuchelli visited present-day Green Bay and then, on September 21, 1832, came to Prairie du Chien.

“The Prairie will become a considerable place in the new Territory”

Thoroughly impressed by the place, Fr. Mazzuchelli wrote, “Here we are at Prairie du Chien, that immense prairie which follows the Mississippi for many miles, with a chain of hills to the east.... In the opinion of the public, the Prairie will become a considerable place in the new Territory.” But, he added, “The poor people wandering about without a shepherd were dying of that hunger of the soul which destroys life.”

At a time of intense national prejudices, it was not easy to be Italian, but the young missionary won the hearts of natives and immigrants alike, though the Irish Catholics struggled with his long name and decided to adapt “Fr. Mazzuchelli” to “Fr. Matthew Kelly” instead!

St. Gabriel – First church in Wisconsin

Fr. Mazzuchelli had heard talk of building a log church in Prairie du Chien. No, he said, it must be stone, which would be both more durable and less expensive. In July of 1839, with the energetic young priest acting as both architect and designer, the work began on St. Gabriel Church. Fr. Mazzuchelli had just been appointed vicar general to the new bishop of Dubuque, Mathias Loras, whom he persuaded to come to Prairie du Chien for the laying of the cornerstone. It was the first visit of a bishop to the future Diocese of La Crosse, resulting in an extraordinary gathering for the small frontier town. More than 700 Catholics participated and a collection was taken up that raised more than \$700 for the building fund.

In 1993, Fr. Mazzuchelli was declared Venerable by Pope John Paul II, the first step toward canonization. As for St. Gabriel Church, it still stands today (with renovations), a testament to the holy priest and to the faith of our ancestors who built it. It is the oldest church not only in the diocese, but in the state.

These are just a few glimpses from our illustrious past. May we come to know and treasure that history. And may we be made, by God's grace, worthy successors in His continued plan for the Diocese of La Crosse that we call home.

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