

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ST. ALOYSIUS PARISH

In considering the 20 centuries since the advent of the Son of God onto this earth, the twenty five years of the existence of one institution seems meager. However, from the time of its establishment by the dynamic and popular John A. Duffy, D.D. until its present anniversary, the existence of the Parish of St. Aloysius Gonzaga has had a tremendous effect upon Christianity, the Diocese of Buffalo, the many thousands of parishioners who have used its facilities and the communities of Buffalo and Cheektowaga.

From the time this parish was officially founded on March 28, 1940 until the present it has continued to grow and prosper. Who from those parishioners of St. James, St. Benedict's and Christ the King parishes who gathered at St. Benedict's parish on the night of April 7, 1940 with the Rev. Walter Gonter to formulate plans for the new parish, would have imagined the organization which exists today. Yet, the pattern was soon set. About seventy-five persons met with Father Gonter at that first meeting and plans were made; first to build a temporary church and then to prepare plans for a permanent church. The first Mass in the new temporary structure was held on Mother's Day, May 12, 1940 and the two masses which were held had over capacity crowds. It was quickly decided that four masses would be necessary. St. Al's, as the parish came quickly to be known, was now eagerly and successfully launched.

Of great importance to any parish is the property it includes and the influence and attitude of its founder. Concerning the property, the original boundaries of the parish were the south city line of Buffalo and the north town line of Cheektowaga; Walton Drive, Cleveland Drive, Homesgarth, Huth, Harlem Road; Southern boundary of St. Calvary Cemetery, Estella St., Eggert Road, Davidson Ave., Leonard St., Kensington Ave., Orleans St., Shirley Ave., Suffolk Ave., and both sides of the boundary streets.

The church property located on Cleveland Drive at the Circle in the Town of Cheektowaga, about ½ mile from the city line of Buffalo, was donated to the Diocese of Buffalo by the Hoffeld Estates, through the kindness of Lynn Bame. It was upon this property that the temporary

church of wood and wallboard, seating about 290 people and costing \$2,600 was erected.

The Priest who began with the peoples mentioned in the areas above was not only one who followed magnificently in the footsteps of Christ Himself, but had that true facility of having others willingly follow in his holy and happy way. Born and reared in the city of Wellsville, young Walter Gonter, a graduate of Immaculate Conception School, continued his education at St. Michael's College, Toronto and at St. Basil's College in Waco, Texas. It was from here that he left for Christ the King Seminary at St. Bonaventure, N.Y. to prepare for the Holy Priesthood. The great dream of his life was realized when on November 15, 1917 he was ordained to the holy priesthood. It is certain, that looking back on his life, Father Walter must have considered this day, and the day he was appointed to be the first pastor of St. Aloysius, the two most eventful days of his life.

Working very closely with Father Gonter in these first days of St. Al's were the two appointed trustees of the parish. These respected parishioners would assist Father in making those important decisions concerning the layout, construction, and the precedent setting practices of the parish. One of the first acts of Mr. William O'Brien and Mr. F. Leo Clark along with Father Gonter was to view the plans of a new Tudor Gothic styled church of brick facing on tile, seating about 750 persons. The plans for this \$96,000 church were accepted and on September 22, 1940, the cornerstone was laid by the Most Rev. John A. Duffy, Bishop of Buffalo. On Christmas of that year the first Mass was sung in the unfinished church. However, Masses were continued in the temporary structure until Laetare Sunday, March 23, 1941 when the new church was dedicated with the Most Rev. John A. Duffy officiating.

With the Church completed and the people contributing very well, plans were again looked at this time for a new rectory. Until then Father Gonter had been living some distance from the church at 72 Burke Drive. So in June of 1941, plans were accepted for a new rectory of brick facing over wood construction. In order to keep the continuity, the same architect, Mortimer J. Murphy, and the same contractors, Balling Bros. and Holler Bros., were awarded the contract. When the rectory was completed in November of 1941, it cost \$36,000.

With everything becoming so beautifully set, the spiritual fruits were beginning to be realized. The First Holy Communion Class received Our Lord for the first time in this parish on December 8, 1940; the first Mission was given by the Redemptorist Fathers, March 1st to the 15th, 1942; the first Confirmation Class here was held on June 9, 1943; and the first Assistant to be appointed was the Rev. Alton J. LaRusch on June 12th, 1942.

The active life of St. Aloysius Parish now could continue to grow from the seeds so recently planted. With Pastor, Assistants and people all pulling together in one harmonious union a happy spiritual atmosphere was to continue through the life of St. Al's. With the spiritual growth of the parish there was also a population growth. So much so, that by 1944, the population of this area had increased to 950 families. It was now time to increase the area.

In 1944, Lynn Bame, representing the Hoffeld Estates, donated a piece

of land about one acre in size just south and adjoining the church property. In 1948 the church bought the lot on the circle at Cleveland and So. Century for \$10,000, adjacent also to the church property. And in 1950 a house was built on the south end of this property on a lot 50' x 120' on which tickets were sold to raise money. The house, having been won by a lady in Pennsylvania who desired to take cash; was then sold to a parishioner. In 1950 the church bought for \$8,000, 4½ acres of land south and west of the church property.

With the parish growing in size, it was now deemed feasible to build a school. Plans having been drawn, studied and approved, ground was broken in August of 1947 for a twelve room school and gymnasium. The same contractors and architect who had constructed the church and rectory were now going to build these new buildings with brick facing to match the Church and rectory. The cost of this new construction was about \$600,000. After almost two years of work, the cornerstone was laid by the Most Rev. John F. O'Hara, Bishop of Buffalo, on Sunday, April 24, 1949. The first fruits from this school were graduated in June of 1951.

By 1952 the Catholic population of St. Al's parish had grown to eighteen hundred families. Finding it necessary to expand the church, the Sacristy was located in the back of the church and about 200 additional persons were now able to sit in Church. On May 5, 1953 another addition was started on the rear of the Church for the Altar Boys' Sacristy on the ground floor.

With Father Walter Gonter as its spiritual leader, St. Aloysius parish had overcome many obstacles and made tremendous strides in thirteen years. However, God called this priest to his eternal reward on August 25, 1953.

The name of Gonter was to continue at St. Al's. For its second pastor this parish was to have the Rev. Harold Gonter, a cousin and very close associate of the late pastor. Father Harold was also born and reared in Wellsville, N.Y. After his graduation from high school he studied at the University of Toronto and St. Bonaventure University. He studied for the Priesthood at St. Michael's College in Toronto and at Christ the King Seminary at St. Bonaventure. In 1917 he and Father Walter were in the same ordination class. This is the man who began his pastorate here on October 18, 1953.

St. Aloysius Parish continued to grow spiritually and family wise, so much so that an addition to the school was becoming necessary. After much study, plans were approved for the new school addition. Work was begun on April 1, 1956 and the total cost of construction was estimated at \$430,000. After about one year, open house of the new school was held on June 2, 1957 and everyone was impressed by the new extension.

On June 10, 1959, Bishop Joseph A. Burke, Bishop of Buffalo, appointed Mr. Samuel A. Cochrane trustee replacing one of the two original trustees, Mr. F. Leo Clark, who moved to Rochester. Mr. Clark had been a hard worker for the benefit of St. Aloysius parish and thousands were sorry to see him leave. Mr. Cochrane was to serve a very short term. Because of his death, Mr. Francis Williams was appointed to replace him on August 1, 1961 by the late Bishop Burke. At the present time, Mr. O'Brien, an original Trustee, and Mr. Williams serve as the official

representative of the people.

It was also in 1959, March to be exact, that the plans and assessments were made for the construction of a Diocesan Catholic High School near St. Aloysius. Neumann High School on Park Club Lane, staffed by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, has serviced hundreds of our students since its beginning.

With the growth in the school, and the increase in the number of Religious Sisters it was decided in 1961 to build a suitable convent for the Sisters of St. Joseph, who staff St. Aloysius School. Up until this time the Sisters traveled each day by taxi from the Mount on Main Street to the school. Father Gonter and the Trustees approved plans for the new convent and work was started in September of 1961. On May 3, 1962 the Sisters took up residence in their new beautiful convent of which the parish is so proud.

Father Harold Gonter and his Assistants and Parishioners continued to watch the Parish grow to its present size, of about 2400 Catholic families with over 900 children enrolled in its parochial school. As was said before, who from that first little group which met in St. Benedict's Church 25 years ago would have dreamed of such a parish. Father Harold Gonter must have relived many things in his mind as the twenty-fifth anniversary drew near, since who knew most of the growth of the parish than this person who had guided it for some twelve years himself; and had seen the first thirteen years through the person of his cousin and close associate, Father Walter Gonter.

Unfortunately, after a short illness Father Harold was called to his eternal reward on March 16, 1965, a few days short before the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the parish he loved so much.

As St. Aloysius Parish begins another 25 years of existence, its third pastor, The Most Rev. Pius A. Benincasa, D.D., J.C.D., assumes his duties as the Good Shepherd. If the first twenty-five years provide any criterion, the future of this parish will see God's choicest blessings showered upon the minds and hearts of all the parishioners and they will be used for their journey to their eternal home.