

Part I of III: One Hundred Fifty Years of Catholicism
The First Half Century

By Dr. Paul Loatman – City Historian

Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of Catholicism in Mechanicville in reality means that we are celebrating the history of not one, but three parishes: St. Paul's, Assumption, and Assumption - St. Paul's. To begin with, that history extends back even further than 150 years, because we know that Mass was celebrated in John Short's barn on William St. in the 1830s. An Augustinian historian suggested a century ago that itinerant priests may have stopped occasionally at a "station" here as early as the 1820s, site unknown. Could they have been celebrating Mass in the "community church"- our village's first such edifice located on the current site of St. Luke's Episcopal Church- that prototypical harbinger of a later ecumenism which opened its doors to all denominations? Possibly, but documentation is lacking to support this. Catholic Directories do not mention Mechanicville until 1839, but they are sketchy at best, a fact which can be appreciated when considering that there were only a few Catholic churches in eastern New York north of New York City in the early 19th century and the Albany Catholic Diocese was not created until 1847.

The early history of Catholicism in Mechanicville is inextricably linked to the story of Irish immigration here. The rapid development of the local parish arose because of a sudden influx of "famine Irish" refugees who had fled Ireland in the face of horrific starvation which claimed 1.5 million lives, a human tragedy so appalling that wandering bands of displaced tenant farmers were reduced to eating grass like draught animals. What attracted some of those few souls fortunate enough to survive to come to Mechanicville? Possibly, work on the Champlain Canal, but more likely, jobs at the American Linen Thread Co., a firm with grist and saw mills located kitty-corner from Irish immigrant John Short's establishment on present-day William St. The company also operated an extensive thread factory near the mouth of the Tenendehowa Creek behind modern-day City Hall. Flax (widely cultivated in Ireland), was introduced to this area by Philip Schuyler in the 18th century. Between 1850 and the early 1880s, the company sold thread to linen cloth makers, shoemakers, and salmon fishermen, moving to Massachusetts at the latter time to be closer to its source of demand. The company's uniqueness was confirmed by the fact that it was the only establishment of its kind to display its wares at the American Centennial Celebration in Philadelphia in 1876.

In 1855, New York's first state census had noted that the forty immigrant men and boys working at the mill earned \$20 a month (when there was work), while the 65 women and girls so employed averaged a little over \$9 a month wages. Meager as these wages were, the 1850s would be considered flush times when the Depression of 1873-1877 reduced these earnings by more than fifty percent. Poverty-stricken immigrant families survived by hiring their daughters out as domestic servants who lived in wealthier local households. Although fewer than one percent of Saratoga County's population consisted of Irish immigrants,

almost forty percent of Mechanicville residents were Children of Erin. Relegated to living in hovels along the creek between the Champlain Canal (now Central Ave.) and the Tenenhowa-Hudson confluence on what was called “the Devil’s Half Acre,” these impoverished newcomers were barely tolerated in the host community.

John Rowlandson dismissed Mechanicville as “nothing but a settlement of Irish” in warnings he issued to fellow would-be Scotch emigrants in 1855. During the early 1850s, the Order of the Star Spangled Banner (the “Know Nothings”), campaigned politically on a platform of excluding Irish immigrants from entering the United States while pledging never to vote for a Catholic political candidate. The same year that this group captured control of the legislature of Massachusetts and elected that state’s governor, a Mechanicville newspaper was warning readers that no real American could profess loyalty to his country unless he had “no contact with any foreign monarch, King, or Dictator.” Given the fact that the Pope was the temporal ruler of the Italian Papal States, the not-so-subtle implication of this message was that Catholics could not be good Americans. This would not be the last time that Irish Catholic loyalties would be called into question locally.

The story of building the first Catholic church here has been recited many times over, but though it may be familiar to many people, it bears repeating . An important misconception should be cleared up immediately, however. Although the historical sketch of the parish written by Fr. T.C. Middleton in 1908 states that Catholic Directories listed it as “St. Mary’s,” not “St. Paul’s,” from 1852 until 1873, contemporaneous local newspapers and census records used the designation “St. Paul’s” exclusively, an indication that the Directories were based upon faulty information. If ever one person earned the title “pillar of the Church,” it would be John Short. This Irish immigrant began farming in Halfmoon in 1829, but then moved to Mechanicville in 1834. Here, he took up residence on the Champlain Canal near the Fairbanks and Bullen Company’s grist mill, opening a store/saloon/hotel at the current site of the B&D Tavern to accommodate travelers who had begun wending their way through town when the artificial waterway was completed in the late 1820s. Various listed in censuses as “landlord,” “saloon-keeper,” or “grocer,” Short not only donated the land on which the current church stands, but he also hired and supervised the six men who built it, paying Michael Farrell, Gerald Mahony, Charles McCarthy, Asa Devoe, Hugh Griffen and Richard Moore their wages out of his own pocket. He donated another \$100 and personally raised \$1,200 more from fellow immigrants to defray the cost of building materials. In all, the expense to build the church, erected over a two-year period, was estimated at \$5,000, plus labor. Yet, as early as 1855, the local census enumerator listed its value at \$20,000, making it by far the most prominent church building in the area. Certainly, it provided a more permanent place of worship for the growing congregation than Mr. Short’s barn where missionaries had conducted services during the previous two decades. Although its tower would later require significant repairs, the

building's structural integrity has withstood the vicissitudes of time and weather for 150 years, not bad for a church erected by immigrants who had no access to architects or trained engineers.

While early census records may exaggerate the building's capacity by listing its seating at 800, these same records indicate that there were 700 weekly communicants, a reasonable figure when we realize that the parish drew from a much wider area than Mechanicville. The lone priest stationed here in the early years typically said Mass at 10:00 a.m. on Sundays, conducted Sunday School at 2:00 p.m., and held Vespers at 4:00 p.m., adding Stations of the Cross on Lenten Fridays at 8:00 p.m. The first few years of its existence found St. Paul's being served by diocesan priests stationed elsewhere, and parish registers do not begin until 1857 when the first Baptism was posted on December 6. More than a year would pass before the first marriage was recorded in January, 1858. Certainly, these sacraments had been performed here at an earlier date, but any sacramental registries kept by missionaries Anthony Farley and Peter Havermans (stationed in Watervliet and Troy respectively) prior to 1857 have not been preserved. Fr. Thomas Kyle, Mechanicville's first Augustinian, arrived in 1857. He was succeeded by Fathers J.T. McDermott, George Meagher, and Louis Edge over the course of the next three years as the Villanova-based religious order began establishing its missionary roots in the Albany Diocese.

Of the fourteen pastors who served here in the parish's first half century, Fr. Philip Izzo and Fr. Arthur McCranor had the greatest impact. Fr. Izzo was unusual in that he served two terms as pastor (1867-76 and 1879-81), the intervening years being taken up with his development of the Stillwater "mission" into St. Peter's Parish. Fr. Izzo was responsible for erecting St. Paul's church tower in 1869, the cost of the 125 foot steeple nearly equaling the expense of building the original church two decades earlier. In 1871, stained glass windows were installed, thanks to the generosity of Michael and John Short and 250 other donors who helped to defray the costs. A native of Italy, Fr. Izzo introduced viniculture locally and brewed his own sacramental wine, a vintage that Fr. Middleton rated "a passable catawba." The missionary and his fellow countryman, assistant pastor, Fr. Nazzareno Proposta, were trailblazers of sorts, having emigrated to the United States decades before the great waves of Italians that began arriving in the 1890s. Apparently physically robust, Fr. Izzo succeeded in fending off a would-be attacker who tried to abscond with the \$365 Christmas Eve Mass collection in 1872. Notably, Catholics were the only local congregation that religiously observed Christmas at this time. Protestant denominations believed that such celebrations were out of tune with the austere religious ethos they had introduced during the Reformation.

Fr. Izzo purchased the old Episcopal Church in Stillwater for \$1,500 in 1873 to serve the large number of immigrants living there who had come from Limerick and Waterford counties in Ireland, most of whom worked for the

Saratoga Paper Co., a predecessor of the larger mills which would be established in Mechanicville in the 1880s. This church building, built by the Stillwater Masonic Order in 1797, served St. Peter's congregation until a new church was blessed by Bishop McNeirney on April 4, 1893. Following his second term at St. Paul's, Fr. Izzo returned home in 1881, serving as a priest in the Naples area until his death on October 2, 1888. Little is known about his colleague, Fr. Proposta.

Fr. Arthur McCranor became well-known as an inveterate defender of Irish Catholic honor throughout the area while appearing in many local pulpits during his pastorate in the 1880s. For many years, the local press had enjoyed pillorying the foibles of the denizens of Mechanicville's "Dublin Row." Stereotyping Irish Catholics as alcoholics, local editors reminded readers of the group's Civil War era anti-draft riots as well as their strident support of violence-prone labor organizations like the Molly Maguires in the 1870s. They suggested that Irish determination to establish their own parochial schools to protect their children from being proselytized by Protestant teachers who controlled the public systems was "un-American."

Countering such anti-Catholic, anti-Irish bias, Fr. McCranor caused a sensation throughout the area when he spoke at St. Bernard's in Cohoes in 1884 on "The Heroic Character of the Irish People," a speech so celebrated that he was implored to repeat it in many other venues. Three months later, the Mechanicville clergyman thrilled an audience in Stillwater with his speech on "The Military Record of Irish Soldiers in Europe and America." Local editor (and active Methodist) Farrington Mead reported that the priest received "thunderous applause and rounds of cheers" for pointing out that while some of their fellow immigrants may have been violently opposing the military draft in 1863, thousands of poor Irish served heroically in the Civil War, taking the places of wealthier Americans who were able to buy their way out of military service by hiring substitutes. Given the willingness of the Stillwater Town Board to heavily tax its property holders to pay for military substitutes in the latter stages of the Civil War, Fr. McCranor's audience knew whereof he spoke. He also took a leading role in promoting the formation of a local chapter of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and organized the first successful Catholic festival. A predecessor's attempt to sponsor such a get-together had failed because, the local press recorded, "persons in humble circumstances" could not support such activities. Unfortunately, Fr. McCranor's tenure was cut short by his unexpected death on May 15, 1886, but he had made his mark both with his parishioners and with the wider community.

The growth of the Irish-Catholic parish in the last two decades of the 19th century paralleled the development of the community at large due to the railroad and paper industry expansion here. Prior to 1887, confirmation classes had been held only sporadically, but beginning in that year, the sacrament was administered at regular three-year intervals to increasingly larger numbers of

candidates. And, while the local press began suggesting that St. Paul's might be interested in finding a larger church to serve its burgeoning community, the parish was busy establishing a number of sodalities, among them the Confraternity of Sts. Augustine and Monica (1883), Children's Temperance (1886), Altar Society (1893), Rosary and Sacred Heart (1894), Children of Mary (1902), and the Holy Name Society (1906).

Religion and public affairs intersected again in the 1890s when the virulently anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic American Protective Association gained prominence for a time. Newspaperman Farrington Mead charged that a large percentage of Republican elected officials throughout New York State were secret members of the A.P.A., a charge that must not have endeared Mead to his fellow Protestants in the community. For their part, local Hibernians were undaunted and continued to conduct their annual parades and picnics. An interesting shift of focus was noted in 1897 when the A. O. H.'s major annual celebrations were rescheduled from the Fourth of July to St. Patrick's Day. That same year, Fr. John Fahey's appearance as the public school's Baccalaureate speaker marked an increased toleration of Catholicism in the local community. In July, editor Mead noted that the First Annual Catholic Picnic and Dance had been a resounding success. The following year, the parish's growing identification with patriotic themes was marked by a special parish flag-raising ceremony to show support for the American troops fighting against Spanish forces in the Philippines and Cuba in the Spanish-American War.

When Fr. Daniel Sullivan succeeded Fr. Fahey as pastor in 1902, he took over an established religious community now serving a burgeoning mill town. At its origin, St. Paul's had served Catholics from Stillwater, Schaghticoke, the unincorporated village of Mechanicville, Halfmoon, and such ineluctably named nearby hamlets as Pig Street, Slab City, and Graball as "an old-time country mission." Fifty years later, almost all of these locales had founded their own parishes, yet St. Paul's membership continued to grow even though its constituency was now limited to Mechanicville and its environs. It did not take Fr. Sullivan long to realize that his growing flock would require a larger church to fulfill its mission. He would also discover that his parish's needs would extend far beyond those involving physical space. The sudden influx of thousands of Italian and Lithuanian Catholic immigrants on the local scene was about reshape the parish in unanticipated and unprecedented ways.

Part II of III: Expanding the Mission
Catholic Mechanicville 1902-1952

By: Dr. Paul Loatman- City Historian

The first half-century of Catholicism in Mechanicville witnessed steady if not spectacular growth. An outcast group of desperately poor Irish immigrants had built a church largely through the efforts of their chief patron, John Short, in 1852. Over the course of the next half-century, the second and third generations established sodalities and other social groups affiliated with the Church which supported the Faith while providing social outlets for Catholics who had been gaining increased acceptance from the larger community. Thus, it was something of an exaggeration to describe Mechanicville as “then a struggling country parish with a mission in Stillwater” when Fr. Daniel J. O’Sullivan had opened his pastorate here in 1902, as his eulogist would do almost twenty-five years later. However, the changes that he and his successors witnessed in the next half-century could hardly have been anticipated by any of the parish’s founders.

Immediately upon arriving in Mechanicville, Fr. O’Sullivan was confronted with two significant issues: how to accommodate the growing number of Catholics who were flocking to Mechanicville as the village’s population nearly quadrupled between 1892 and 1905. And, in particular, how to meet the religious needs of groups whose devotional practices, religious experiences, and immigrant adjustment were so different from each other? How these questions were addressed would shape the history of the parish throughout most of the twentieth century.

Coming from a political system where persecution led them to wear their religion on their sleeves and entering a society with a long tradition of questioning the loyalty of Irish Catholics in America, immigrants from the Emerald Isle forged tight-knit parishes and a hierarchical system which emphasized their uniqueness with the expectation that they would prevail against their tormentors in the hereafter, if not now. They shared with Polish-speaking immigrants a sense that religion and cultural identity were inextricably linked. However, this bond of uniqueness created a sense of exclusion toward other Catholics who had different experiences. Italians came from an environment where Church and state were bound together. Indeed, the Church in Italy not only received financial support from the government; at times, it exploited the peasants as much as the corrupt government officials did, creating a sense of distrust toward all authority-civil and religious. Also, the extravagant festivities associated with Italian religious feasts were unheard of by the Irish, while Italians regarded the concept of voluntary support of the Church, and formal membership, as unfathomable. The hierarchy’s attitude stating that American Catholicism was a “one-size-fits-all” religion made conflict inevitable when waves of these immigrants arrived here after 1895.

Born in County Cork in 1859 and emigrating with his parents to Massachusetts in his boyhood, Father O'Sullivan was shaped by the Irish immigrant experience in Lawrence before he entered the seminary on July 3, 1882, at the age of 23. Among a diverse group of ethnic groups, the Irish had come to dominate Catholic Lawrence, culturally and religiously, in a manner that could later be described as "triumphalist." Possessing both optimism and ambition when he came here, Fr. O'Sullivan saw his mission in Mechanicville as requiring him to raise the visible symbols of Catholicism to a position concomitant with its adherents' social status in the community. Nine years into his pastorate and twenty-five years into his priesthood, he pointed out that although "old-timers who saw the church on William St. [built] in 1852 ... wondered why a building so vast should be erected for the few Catholics of the place..., today that edifice is inadequate to the comfortable accommodation of the parishioners on Sunday." In the beginning, one Mass was celebrated each Sunday; by 1911, there were four. In 1852, the parish numbered in the hundreds; by 1911, the thousands who belonged required a much larger church.

At the parish's inception, the only distinction among its members was whether they had come from Ireland two years or two decades ago. Half a century later, though all parishioners were equally familiar with the Latin Mass, Italian and Polish-speaking immigrants had little in common with their Irish co-religionists. Although Polish-speaking priests were brought here for mission purposes, none were ever assigned on a permanent basis. However, the 500 Italian immigrants here in 1905, many of them temporary "birds of passage," had a Mass set aside for them at 9:15 a.m. each Sunday. Beginning in 1906, the Augustinians regularly assigned an Italian priest to assist the parish, the first among them, newly-ordained missionary Fr. Serafino Aurigemma from Monteforte Iripina, a small paese southeast of Naples. After serving here for two years, he was recalled to Philadelphia, replaced by a succession of missionaries who served until 1911 when Fr. Aurigemma returned for a second three-year term here.

Between 1914 and 1918, local Italian immigrants were ministered to by Fr. Daniel Scalabrella, described by his successor as "a zealous and saintly priest." Despite the efforts of these missionaries, only about ninety souls attended the weekly Italian Masses and "the collections were nil." Fr. Scalabrella "realized that little or nothing could be accomplished among our people, as long as they did not have a place to worship of their own," Fr. Aurigemma later recalled. Indeed, as early as September, 1912, he himself had sought permission from the Village Board to show Sunday movies on behalf of the "Italian Church Fund," a request that was denied, given the strictness of the prevailing "Sunday observance" laws of that period. Hoping to remedy the situation, his successor, Fr. Scalabrella, purchased "the Houlihan estate" at the corner of Viall and Saratoga Avenues in anticipation of erecting a new church there, a move endorsed by the Bishop. However, before any of these plans had come to fruition, Fr. Scalabrella died in the "Spanish flu" pandemic in October, 1918, one of about 100 victims locally who

were taken in the deadliest epidemic in American history. Fr. Aurigemma preached the funeral eulogy for his fellow Augustinian, after which the Bishop requested his return to Mechanicville for a third time. The young priest accepted the call, but with the stipulation that he be freed from the burden of building a new church. Rather, he proposed purchasing the old St. Paul's building, used by the Italian congregation unofficially after the new St. Paul's church had been opened in 1916. The Bishop and Augustinian provincial both agreed, and Fr. Aurigemma began his third term of service in Mechanicville in 1919, a pastoral tenure that would last until 1961, followed by a decade of serving as Pastor Emeritus.

In his new role, Fr. Aurigemma confronted two problems: how to persuade the people that buying the old church was a wise decision; and, how to convince the pastor of St. Paul's church to sell the building at a moderate price. Although he was reticent to speak about it when I interviewed him thirty-five years ago, Fr. Aurigemma did not deny the story that the greeting party which met him upon his arrival in Troy to begin his pastorate left him standing at the train station once he had confirmed his decision to abandon the new building project. As he wrote in 1940, "it was hard work to convince the people of the temerity of building." This issue as well as the degree of lay control to be permitted in the parish contributed to the decision of some local immigrants to organize their own ethnic congregation in 1923, the Italian Mission Church, an evangelical sect that maintains congregations in Riverside and Schenectady.

The following year, Fr. Aurigemma ran afoul of the Church hierarchy when he sought an exemption against the diocesan-wide edict proscribing Italian parishes from participating in street festivals such as the one the local Fratellenza had conducted since 1904. As he explained in a letter to the pastor of St. Paul's the following year, Bishop Edmund Gibbons wrote that "the reasons why I prohibit these processions are well known" because of the "scandal and shock, especially to the non-Catholics who witnessed the extravagant performances of the people who took part in them." Fr. Aurigemma complied (although the Fratellenza continued to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption without direct parish participation), but he did not take the Bishop's order lying down. Giving as good as he got, he informed his superior that his St. Paul's counterpart violated the spirit of the Bishop's edict by conducting a procession of his own. Ever the diplomat, the Bishop reluctantly requested that Fr. McErlain forego St. Paul's annual May Procession "so as not to give anybody a chance to say that I was discriminating in favor of the Irish.... No doubt you realize the difficulties I have with the Italians and will be willing to accede to my request." While the pastor of St. Paul's did comply, he expressed shock that anyone would suggest that his "children's procession" should be equated with "a vulgar street festival." He also took umbrage with Fr. Aurigemma's request that the Church of the Assumption be exempted from the Bishop's ruling, while suggesting that "a hint from the Bishop to ANY pastor should be more than sufficient."

Disputes of a similar nature arose in another quarter of St. Paul's parish. Despite what Harvard church historian, Sydney Ahlstrom, has described as the "fervency of devotion to the Catholic Church" of Polish-speaking immigrants, the Bishop in 1930 was forced to deal with complaints from that group that the pastor of St. Paul's did not want "Catholic minorities" buried in the same cemetery as their Irish co-religionists. The complainant went on to note that Polish-speaking priests occasionally assigned here were prohibited from administering the sacraments in their native tongue. These immigrants, primarily Lithuanians, had founded a St. John's Society prior to World War I, but the fact that they never established their own parish may have had as much to do with their close relationships with Irish foremen with whom the majority of them worked in the paper mill as it did with the decline of their numbers after 1915. Unlike the Italian population, the Polish-speaking group dwindled in size following the passage of racist anti-immigration laws by Congress in the 1920s. However, the persistency of the group is witnessed by the fact that over 70 percent of children enrolled in School 4 in Riverside- the main center of the group- were Slavic-surnamed in 1958, the last year the school was in operation, comparable to the 81 percent figure for Italian-surnamed students attending School 3 on Saratoga Avenue at the same time.

In the meantime, evidence of St. Paul's continued growth was signified by the opening of a Parish Hall on St. Patrick's Day, 1926, and the inauguration of the new parochial school the following September. By this time, the parish had acquired all of the trappings of a "typical" Irish Catholic parish: four Masses on Sundays followed by Benediction at 4 p.m., an hour after Baptisms; two daily weekday Masses and four hours of Confessions on Saturdays. Five affiliated sodalities- the K. of C., Catholic Daughters, Ladies Catholic Benevolent Aid Society, the Holy Name, and the Ladies Auxiliary of the Ancient Order of Hibernians-each met twice a month on different days, while the Sacred Heart Society met once a week. Wealthier members were invited to join the pastor to go "On to Chicago" in June of that year to attend the Eucharistic Congress. Obviously, the devout Catholic easily could have revolved his or her life around the Church and its associated para-religious activities. Given the fact that the pastor, Fr. Alfred Valiquette, had assured Bishop Gibbons the "our city [government] is made up of Catholic men from the Mayor down," St. Paul's parishioners could assume that life centered around their Church and religion, regardless of what may have been going on in the larger realm of American society. Thus, no one had questioned the appropriateness of the City Council's passage of a resolution on May 23, 1921, instructing President Warren Harding to oppose "the present war in Ireland, [being] waged to repress representative government with every circumstance of barbarism," while urging him to diplomatically recognize the newly-created Republic of Ireland. On a more mundane level, the traffic signals outside of St. Paul's on Main and William Streets were inverted so that the Irish green was on top.

The collective self-image of a parish is hard to discern, but an interesting note printed in "Our Parish Calendar" for April, 1926, quoting an "eminent French Protestant" sociologist provides some insight into the Pastor's psyche, if not that of the parish at large. Keeping in mind that the sensational Scopes "monkey trial" challenging the right to teach evolution in schools had just concluded, and the Ku Klux Klan was then reaching the height of its popularity in the North as the leading opponent of Catholic immigration to the United States, the bulletin cited approvingly Andre Siegfried's observation that American Protestantism was "national, conservative, and aristocratic while Catholicism ... in general is liberal, social, and progressive." Lest we believe that the pastor or his flock were presumptuous of their own virtue, however, the eulogy that Fr. McErlain gave for former pastor, Fr. D.J. O'Sullivan, at his passing earlier that year captured another aspect typical of Irish-Catholic religious sensibility at that time. Noting that this Irish immigrant priest "had a bond [with his parishioners] stronger than that of respect ordinarily shown to a pastor," he cautioned his listeners that prayers were still required on behalf of his soul because "even angels are imperfect in the sight of God." Thus, parishioners might not realize that "a priest raising his hand so often in benediction may in some moment commit some imperfection in the sight of God." Imperfect or not, the example set by these priests left a strong impression on their charges if we are to judge by the number of vocations that the parish produced during these years.

While the Great Depression hit Mechanicville as severely as any other mill town, the list of contributors to the parish for 1935-36 noted 1540 donors providing financial support. Although the smallest annual total was 5 cents, a significant number of contributors gave an average of at least 50 cents a week, no small amount when those who had jobs (almost one-third of the workforce was laid off) were fortunate enough to earn much more than a few dollars a day.

World War II and its aftermath brought better times financially, and although the parish did not fulfill Fr. O'Sullivan's 1911 prediction that the new church on North Main St. being built that year "would call for greater enlargement" in the future, the parish did rededicate a new altar on May 23, 1947, a sign of its members' continuing commitment to demonstrate their pride in the development of their religious community. It was during this period, also, that St. Paul's undertook an extensive program of CYO activities to meet the needs of young people who were entering the work force at later ages than they had in the 1920s and '30s. There was a concern that this extra free time needed to be filled constructively. The CYO program more than adequately met that need while also establishing the basis for a highly successful athletic program at Mechanicville High School in coming years.

Meanwhile, the Church of the Assumption continued its missionary journey of ministering to the needs of the local Italian community. The parish lacked the financial resources of its larger Catholic sister church, reflecting the

relative socio-economic position of the two groups. Thus, it was with pride that Fr. Aurigemma reported to his congregation in 1924 that they had reduced the parish's debt to \$5,000 after acquiring both St. Paul's Church and rectory, offsetting these expenses by selling the old "Houlihan estate" acquired by Fr. Scalabrella for \$6,500. He congratulated the parishioners by telling them that "you have patronized God's cause ... [and] his Religion is better practiced by our people." However, the relatively flush times of the "Roaring Twenties" did not last through the entire decade.

The Assumption congregation consisted largely of factory hands and day laborers, men and women particularly vulnerable to the ill winds that blew through the American economy at the end of the 1920s. Even before this, many local Italians were hard hit by the failure of the Banco Della Vigna, the immigrant institution ordered closed by the State Banking Commissioner in 1924. Some resources were salvaged when the Commissioner liquidated the institution's assets in 1927, giving depositors 57 percent of their deposits in return. However, things would go downhill from there following the Crash of the Stock Market in 1929, and before the end of the 1930s, both of Mechanicville's more conventional banks-the First National and Manufacturer's National- failed and were put into receivership. Thus, it is not surprising that Fr. Aurigemma explained to the Chancellor of the Catholic Diocese that the failure of his parish to support the diocesan fund-raising campaign in 1933 "is not due to the lack of religion on the part of the people...." Explaining that he had not taken a salary in a number of years, he went on to note: "one-half of the people here are out of work and depend on the city. The rest work 2 or 3 days for \$5-6 per week And owing to the failure of the two banks, the financial condition of this parish has suffered quite a bit." Gradually, the Depression loosened its strangle-hold on the economy and both the parish and its membership were able to survive.

Although they may have possessed limited financial resources throughout their early history, these parishioners continued to develop the strong musical tradition they had brought with them from the old-country. Beginning as early as October 25, 1917, a group calling itself "The Young Men's Italian Club of the Assumption Parish" (even though the parish did not exist yet) held a "concert of classical character." While musical talent from other communities participated, a strong representation came from the local ranks, among them: Dr. Domenico Mauro-tenor; Elena Aurigemma-pianist; Ferdinando Amodeo-violinist; and Professors Pietro Federico and Lawrence Izzo. Two years later, a special music program was conducted by the church choir during the parish's dedication ceremony on November 30, 1919. No one thought it unusual that such a group would be "concert-ready" even before the parish it represented had come into existence. Twenty years later, Fr. Aurigemma matter-of-factly thanked the choir for its usual stellar Good Friday performance of Rossini's "Stabat Mater," a piece which presents formidable challenges to the most professional of choral groups.

This musical talent displayed itself in other than classical forms as well. For instance, the four -day “Grand Bazaar” held in May, 1940, displayed the sounds of a clarinet and sax quartet of Ralph Marra, Rolando Gaetano, Angelo Friello, and Mario Gaetano, while trumpeters Michael Zurlo, Michael Martone, Michael Cappetta and Joseph DiBello added their own sound to the mix. Looking for a trombone and baritone duet? Eugene Siciliano and Anthony Lembo filled the bill. Clarinet duets were performed by cousins Carmie and Carmie DeCrescente who formed a quartet two nights later when joined by trumpeters Martone and Zurlo. Other musicians on display included Sonny Cuilla, Lena Enzogna, and Vince D’Amico, while song medleys were performed by Joe Panza and Anna Fargnoli. Assumption may not have been the richest parish around, but nobody could accuse it of not being “in the swing.’

The same year that St. Paul’s replaced its original altar with more modern marble and oak pieces still in use today in a modified setting, Fr. Aurigemma published a list of donors to Assumption’s monthly collections for 1947. While the list still appeared small when compared to that of its sister parish, progress had been made in insuring the parish’s economic survival. Five years later, as the building housing the Italian national parish reached its centennial, the parish undertook renovations of the structure. A special Mass celebrating the 100 years of its use as a Catholic church was offered on October 25, 1952, with the Franciscan Prior from Graymoor concelebrating with Fr. Aurigemma. Interestingly enough, no Augustinians from either St. Paul’s or Villanova took part in the ceremonies, and the parish that had brought Catholicism to life in Mechanicville appeared to take no note of this historic event.

The first century of Catholicism found the Church here in a much stronger position than it had been at its founding. In the early 1950s, Mechanicville’s economy continued to grow with the paper mill, railroads, and textile industry provided numerous job opportunities for workers. Simultaneously, more and more young people graduating from both St. Paul’s School and the local public high school were beginning to take advantage of the opportunities offered by local colleges to earn professional degrees. Religiously, the Pope had declared The Feast of the Assumption an official holy day in the church calendar, adding to the sense of pride Italian Catholics here took in their parish. In a wider sense, there was then an aura about Catholicism that it was, like St. Peter, firm as a rock and changeless for all of the ages. As they looked toward the future, Mechanicville’s Catholics could be sure that there would be one constant in their lives that would be free from the stresses and influences of the larger society—their bedrock religion. How true this turned out to be will be dealt with in a final installment on the history of Catholicism in Mechanicville to follow.

Part III of III: 1952 – 2002
Past and Prologue: Mechanicville Catholic History
By Dr. Paul Loatman- City Historian

In its first century, Catholicism took root and grew in Mechanicville by transplanting an unchanging religious tradition to a new environment being shaped by the dynamic of Irish, Italian, and Lithuanian immigrants moving into an expanding mill town. In the next fifty years, by contrast, the dynamic of change came not so much from the host community as from the institution of the Church itself.

Younger Catholics may shake their heads in both bewilderment and bemusement upon reading this, but the typical Catholic accepted a number of adages as “eternal truths” half a century ago:

Once a priest, always a priest.
The Pope is always an Italian.
Marriage is forever.
The Mass always was, and always will be, said in Latin.

The last fifty years have demonstrated that these truisms may be neither eternal nor true, at least in the manner in which they were previously understood. Disproving or modifying our understanding of their applicability to Catholicism may have been the least of it because, while that process may have been earth-shaking enough, even more profound changes were at work that would drastically change the way parishioners viewed their religion and the roles they were expected to play in it. Most profoundly, the Church emerged from Vatican Council II (1962-1965) with a rediscovered sense of itself as “the people of God” where the laity was no longer expected to be merely passive spectators seeking private piety watching a mysterious ceremony which was celebrated in what was then proudly described as a “dead language.” Hereafter, they were called to be active participants, so enlivened by the communal experience of Sunday Masses that they would put the Faith into practice in homes, schools, and workplaces throughout the week. The era of the Baltimore Catechism’s rote responses to pre-digested questions formulated 150 years ago was over; a renewed interest in Biblical study, Church history, and liturgical renewal was called for- and it would involve the laity as much as, if not more so, than the clergy. But, what did this mean in practical terms, right here in River City?

When the Sisters of Atonement were brought here by Fr. Serafino Aurigemma in 1947 to conduct the Assumption parish’s catechetical program, one of their primary responsibilities involved “preparing the children” for First Communion, just as their Josephite opposite numbers had been doing for two decades with the children in St. Paul’s parish. When the Atonement sisters left Mechanicville thirty years later, First Communion preparations entailed the religious education of the parents as much as the children. The responsibility for this also had by then devolved onto a catechetical program run almost entirely by the laity, as it is now, with the nuns acting as much as coordinators as teachers. Today, this approach has been extended to the point where

some parents have assumed full responsibility for the catechesis of their children in a “home-based” program engaging the family at an even higher level of responsibility.

In the early twentieth century, sodalities such as the Sacred Heart Society, the Holy Name Society, the Catholic Daughters and many others were founded by Mechanicville’s two Catholic congregations so that parishioners- cut off from the larger society both by their own parochialism and the hostility of the larger society- could socialize within a context that would reinforce their Faith. These organizations provided the only outlets where the laity were permitted to assume leadership roles in the Church.

Today, though many of these organizations continue to exist, the role of the laity has expanded dramatically. Not only are they permitted to assume leadership roles; their new understanding of themselves as “the people of God” demands that they do so. What is now taken for granted in CCD, Bible studies, Prayer and Worship, the Parish Council, Pre-Cana Preparation, Hospitality, Social Action and many other committees- i.e., the participation and leadership of the laity- would have been dreaded by both clergy and laity alike fifty years ago. Although he was merely acting as a harbinger of the future, when Fr. Alfred Monte encouraged a group of “Concerned Assumption Parishoners” in 1971 to organize themselves into a parish council, he was acting in a manner that would have been regarded as subversive by priests and laity alike only a few years earlier.

In another regard, Catholicism in Mechanicville and America at large re-oriented itself toward the larger society when it discovered the Kennedy family living in the White House and Pope John XXIII in the Vatican. The Greek-derivative term “ecumenical” became a word Christians of all persuasions learned to both spell and pronounce by the late 1960s. But, before local Catholics could embrace Mechanicville’s other Christians (Baptists, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians), they had to learn to deal with fellow Catholics worshipping across the street from each other. Fifty years ago, rare was the child baptized in either local Catholic congregation who had parents from different parishes, much less from different Faiths. A possible watershed event, now long-since forgotten, occurred at a week-long joint parish mission conducted in 1969. Sponsored by the Diocese, it attracted hundreds of Catholics from both parishes, and while a good deal of self-examination was encouraged, it focused as much on the community at large as it did on the individual. Large-group and small-group discussions examined issues such as the appropriate role the laity should play in liturgical celebrations and parish councils, adjustment to the novelty of hearing the Mass said in English rather than in Latin, the changing roles of priests and religious, and raft of other issues raised by the aftermath of Vatican II. All of this was followed by a communal penance service- a first for most parishioners. Because sessions were held on alternate days in both churches, the mission marked the first time many Mechanicville Catholics had crossed the invisible line of demarcation which had separated the two congregations for sixty years.

Five years later when a management-consultant firm advised the Augustinian Order to close its upstate New York parishes in the face of declining vocations, a

proposed merger of Mechanicville's two Catholic parishes received a chilly reception at a public meeting attended by a crowd of nearly a thousand. The editor of the Augustinian *Provincial Newsletter*, following a tour of upstate New York in the summer of 1974, noted that a majority of priests opposed closing any parishes and "those who favored it were largely ignorant of the situation in the ... area." These matters stood for nearly three years.

When the merger issue re-emerged in 1977, petitions with over 1,000 signatures of Assumption parishioners protesting the move were presented to Fr. Howard Hubbard, Acting Head and soon-to-be named Bishop of the Albany Diocese. Although telling the local press that a final decision in the matter would not be subject to any "voting procedure," Hubbard went on to note that the petition raised "real concerns," given the fact that the signatures of more than half of the adult members of the parish had been collected in less than three days. He also stated that "the importance of identity in one's whole life process ... cannot be minimized." Assumption parishioners stated that they merely wished to preserve a dynamic institution whose extinction threatened their ethnic identity and "sense of shared experience."

Following meetings with representative groups on both sides of the issue, the newly-appointed Bishop won concurrence from the Augustinian Order that it would continue to staff the newly-merged Assumption-St. Paul Parish. Yet, though united, the merger agreement stipulated that both parish's church buildings continue to be used for daily and weekly services, a practice followed today. Additionally, an Ethnic Affairs Committee was to be incorporated into the organizational structure of the parish.

The merger issue may have been unnecessarily complicated by the enthusiasm for "architectural correctness" that came into vogue in the aftermath of Vatican II. Gratian, a twelfth century religious commentator, proclaimed that "paintings are the Bible of the laity," and throughout the ages, Catholic churches have been noted for their murals, statues, and paintings. However, it became *au courant* during the 1970s to subscribe to the dictate that such visual representations had been intended for pre-literate congregations and were now *passé*. In keeping with this philosophy, when the Church of the Assumption was "renovated" at the time of the merger, all statuary and pictorial traces of its heritage as an Italian ethnic parish were removed- Sts. Rocco, Anthony, and associates being relegated to exile in the belfry. However, when St. Paul's Church was renovated fifteen years later, the same diocesan architectural consultants who had provided advice on Assumption's renovations issued *mea culpas* for their past over-zealousness in favoring the austere look. In contrast, they now recommended that St. Paul's statuary and paintings be restored to their original brilliance and given added prominence through the use of special lighting to highlight them. The irony of the contrasting approaches taken with the two restorations was not lost on everyone.

In other cases, enthusiasm for change may have overstepped its bounds here and in other parishes throughout the country. Older Catholics today nod in recognition when listening to well-known comedians jest about the legendary sense of guilt Catholics formerly embraced, a product of parental and religious training that encouraged them to go to Confession weekly, or at least monthly. Little wonder then that it was the rule of

thumb in the 1950s that St. Paul's and Assumption conducted four-hour weekly Saturday Penance services. However, such practices went by the boards in the 1970s. The recent trend toward infrequent confession led Fr. Frank Gallogoly (who served here both as an Associate and as Pastor) to express amazement at how angelic Mechanicville Catholics had become in the interim between his first and second local assignments in the 1970s and 1990s.

Other recent changes have struck a chord of regret rather than discord. After more than six decades of service, St. Paul's Parochial School closed its doors in 1988. During its years of service, many of its graduates had achieved academic distinction, often excelling when they went on to Mechanicville's and other area high schools. Its fate came on the heels of other school closings that occurred throughout the diocese, attributed in large part to the inability of parishes to incur the costs of hiring paid lay faculty to replace the teaching orders of nuns whose volunteer efforts had previously subsidized Catholic education throughout the diocese. In the case of St. Paul's, the school's financial problems were exacerbated by the fact that they arose at a period of economic decline in the area.

In another regard, Mechanicville Catholics took pride in the prominence achieved by native-son, Monsignor John Nolan, who for many years represented the Papacy in the Middle East as the head of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association. An outstanding homilist, parishioners always looked forward to hearing him preach at Mass during his numerous visits here. Because of his extensive first-hand experience in a critical part of the world, Monsignor Nolan's opinions were much sought after by the national media at times of crisis in the Middle East, and he was as likely to be quoted by NBC News as by the diocesan *Evangelist* in such instances. Pope John Paul II recognized his efforts on behalf of Palestinian Christian refugees by raising him to the episcopacy in 1988. Bishop Nolan died in 1997 and is buried in the local parish cemetery.

Celebrating 150 years of Catholicism in Mechanicville, the question arises: where does this period fall in the larger scheme of things? However, answering that question would require us to stand outside of Time, viewing the End- something only God can do. Yet, having become a living part of that history, each Catholic must become his or her own historian in an attempt to make sense of it all. As it celebrated its sesquicentennial, the parish membership included more than thirty parishioners who were over ninety years of age-the oldest among them enjoying her 103rd year. As a group, they have represented the last connection to the "heroic generation": outcast immigrant refugees who struggled to keep body and soul together, often

having to fight to maintain their dignity in a society that did not always welcome them, a generation which experienced two world wars and a Great Depression. And through it all, they kept the Faith.

What is the challenge confronting the children and grandchildren of this “heroic generation”? Enjoying the benefits of freedom and the abundant fruits of their labor, they may well be facing the “adversities of affluence” rather than their ancestors’ challenge of poverty. Yet, while the demands on them may be new, they are no less challenging than those faced by their predecessors. How to keep, not body and soul, but families together; how to protect the young from the allurements of an increasingly materialistic popular culture; how to sustain one-parent families; how to care for the elderly and protect their dignity- these are but a few of the challenges they face now and will continue to face in the future. Seventy-five years ago, Catholics joined with other Mechanicville Christians to “keep holy the Sabbath” by prohibiting the showing of motion pictures on Sunday afternoons. Today, Sunday services of all faiths are compelled to compete with youth soccer, basketball, and football- and religious indifference.

Older generations often toiled long and exhausting hours in the factories, mills, and rail yards of Mechanicville, but in many cases, two and three generations of the same family worked side by side- and were able to walk to and from their places of work. That world has long since ceased to exist, never to return. Yet, despite the fact that many of our young people must leave the area to find employment after completing their education, the parish remains a dynamic Catholic community with active sodalities, numerous volunteer committees, and choirs renowned for their musical virtuosity. Continuing to be staffed by two Augustinians, the parish is a highly spirited as well as a deeply spiritual Catholic community, displaying hospitality, openness, commitment and love in its on-going relationship with the devoted and exemplary clergy who serve it

Thus, while many of today’s challenges may appear daunting, the 150th commemoration marks a celebration not only of past triumphs over adversity, but also, a recognition that even in the darkest hours (maybe *mostly* in those darkest hours), it is Faith that sustains our lives. Recognizing this, the legacy of this history requires that it be passed on to future generations by being lived it each day.

