

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

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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 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 Fagnoli. 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.