

Parish Missions

The parish mission has been a feature of Catholic life in the American Midwest since the 1820s. This week of spiritual renewal was first observed in Ohio parishes. The practice migrated north and west as the Old Northwest opened to settlers from the east coast and immigrants. The Catholic mission, or parish retreat, as it was also known in those years, dovetailed well with the tent revivals and camp meetings preached by missionaries of other denominations. Both were high on hellfire and brimstone preaching that evoked guilt and hopefully conversion. Catholics would confess to their priests while Protestants would have an altar call. The Catholic mission was a colorful affair with its mission cross, singing and procession. The Protestant revival was equally as colorful with its dancing, clapping and singing. These retreats were high on emotion and so needed to be repeated with regular frequency to sustain the desired level of religiosity. The whole experience in its Catholic or Protestant manifestations sparked or revived the faith among settlers whose practice of the faith was slim because churches were few and far between. Sometimes the European missionaries who served the dispersed and isolated rural immigrants would call upon the mission preacher to help found a parish or unite a floundering or divided one. Dr. Franz Xavier Paulhuber, the pastor of St. Boniface and its mission parishes, did just that.

Paulhuber was sent to St. Boniface in July 1851 with Bishop Henni's charge:

"Go to St. Boniface. There awaits you a bit of work requiring experience and heartiness. The community is discordant, and the new church has for years been only the foundation. There is no school there, and I have sent my best priests there, even though in many cases it was in vain. Make this your masterwork."

The next day Paulhuber left for St. Boniface. What he found there was as the Bishop said and not that different from what he found in other German settlements. He relates:

"Among the most distressing experiences of a German missionary was the lack of unity which existed already before they crossed the ocean; north and south Germans, Rheinlanders, Hessians, Rheinpfälzer, Badeners, Swabish, Saxons, and Bavarians. The first and most common example of the discord among them came in respect to the building of the church and rectory. Each party, indeed, each family wanted the buildings to be very close to his house, to make church attendance easier and more comfortable. Of course, the value of nearby land, businesses and taverns would instantly rise. With great solicitude, the missionary had to avoid petty jealousy among the German nationalities."

And, even within any one of these nationalities you would have local religious customs, local folk songs and local resentments passed on from a generation or two earlier when immigrants' parents and grandparents may have been subjects of the ecclesial principalities of the Holy Roman Empire and when religious orders whose privileged position made them the landlords of acre upon acre. The discord is understandable; yet, the missionary's superiors expected him to do something about it.

One thing Paulhuber did was to bring in the popular Jesuit preacher, Fr. Franz Xavier Weninger. Sometime after Corpus Christi 1852, Weninger arrived and began working his magic not only at St. Boniface but also at Paulhuber's other missions in Richfield and Polk townships. Between the three-day missions Paulhuber regularly conducted in the area and Weninger's work that summer, the folks in each congregation must have started working together. By All Souls Day 1852 the St. Boniface Church was ready for dedication and by the time he left to build St. Francis Seminary in summer 1853, each congregation had its own church.

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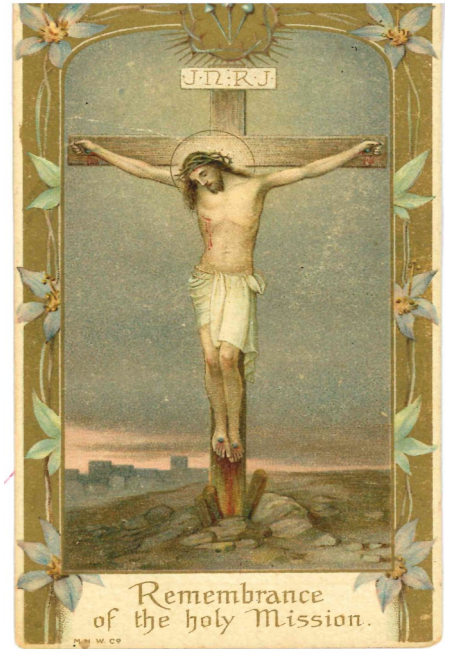
In Those Days continued...

Weninger returned in 1864 to preach missions in Washington and Dodge county parishes from August to November, St. Boniface included. This time four local pastors assisted with the preaching and confessions. These weeks of spiritual renewal have remained a regular feature of parish life. Here are the extant dates of subsequent ones.

- * February 25 - March 3, 1912 by the Redemptorist Fathers Mathias Meyer and Peter Maas
- * June 19 to 26, 1921 by the Capuchins
- * 1948
- * October 5 – 12, 1952 Redemptorist Father Andrew Oehm
- * January 21 – 26, 1990 Capuchin Father Casper Stollenwerk
- * February 16 – 20, 1992 Father Patrick Lloyd, O.S.s.C. "Sacred Heart: Spirituality for the 1990s. The Power of God's Love Revealed in the Pierced Heart of Our Risen Lord."
- * March 26 – 29, 2017 Donald Neureuther and Alice Miller Nation, "The Mysteries of Life: A Lenten Mission and Experience of the Sacred."
- * March 11 – 13, 2018 Redemptorist Father Thomas Donaldson, "We are God's Servants Called into Ministry and Sent Forth to Proclaim God's Word."
- * April 17 – 21, 2021 Capuchin Father Tom Nguyen, "Joy and Hope for the Future."

Through the years the parish mission's topic and style have changed. The topic might be selected by a committee or pastor in conjunction with the preacher or it simply follows the cursus of the daily lectionary readings. The inspirational speech has replaced the old fire and brimstone style of preaching. The missions draw fewer people now but those who come finding them uplifting and supportive of their spiritual journey. The preaching takes place within the Liturgy of the Hours, a Liturgy of the Word, a healing or penance service. The mission is usually concluded with a celebration of the Eucharist.

J. Mike



SOUVENIR of the MISSION
GIVEN AT
St. Boniface Church. Richfield, Wis.,
February 25 to March 3, 1912,
By Rev. Redemptorist Fathers.

Christian, Only One Thing is Necessary:
SAVE YOUR SOUL.

1. Receive regularly the Sacraments of Confession and Communion.
2. Say your morning and evening prayers. Make acts of Faith, Hope and Charity every day; at night, before retiring, examine your Conscience and make an act of Contrition.
3. Attend Mass on all Sundays and Holidays of Obligation.
4. If there exist any Church Societies in your parish, join at least one of them.
5. It is an obligation binding under sin to contribute to the support of the Church.
6. You are obliged to avoid the Occasions of Sin; an occasion of sin is any person, place or thing which will likely lead you into sin.
7. Practice Daily Devotion to the Blessed Virgin; pray to her particularly for the grace of a Happy Death.
8. Remember: Death — Judgment — Heaven — Hell — and you will persevere unto the end.

Rev. Jos. Wurm,
Rector.

DIEDERICH-SCHAEFFER CO., MILWAUKEE.