Missionaries to the Coal Patches: The MCCD

By Kenneth Ogorak

It's an early Sunday morning. And rosy-fingered dawn looks a bit coal-smudged as the sun rises over a 1903 southwestern Pennsylvania mining town.

Enter the fishers. Not sportsmen or sportswomen, but members of an effort known as the MCCD—the Missionary Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. The fishers searched the mining towns and inner-city neighborhoods in the Diocese of Pittsburgh 100 years ago, gathering children and adults for Mass, for religious instruction, for formation into communities of faith.

I will offer a brief account of the MCCD's contribution to catechesis in the Diocese of Pittsburgh and beyond.

One hundred years ago, Pittsburgh and its surrounding communities were dependent, economically, on heavy industry. While many of the immigrants in the early twentieth century made a living in the city's mills and factories, thousands of others settled in small mining towns located several difficult miles from this industrial center.

In 1985 Mary Downey James, a long-time catechetical minister, compiled a history of the CCD in this diocese, *CCD: An Expression of Ministry*. There, James records in detail the legacy of the Missionary Confraternity of Christian Doctrine—so named by Bishop Regis Canevin, circa 1908—and much of what follows below draws heavily on her research.

In 1903, Fr. Ed Griffin presented to Bishop Canevin a plan to attend to the catechetical needs of Catholic families who lived in the many small, isolated mining communities. Griffin's proposal was based, in part, on a program being used in Detroit. His plan called for an apostolate whereby lay catechists under clerical guidance would journey regularly to remote areas of the diocese.
Clergy in turn would visit these scattered, newly formed settlements to celebrate Mass and other sacraments. Various conditions made initial progress a bit slow. In 1908, though, a breakthrough occurred when Jim Doyle, an urban Catholic, moved to the mining town of Cecil, whose nearest Catholic church was nine miles distant.

Jim asked his former parish’s CCD president, Anna Sweeney, for help in finding catechists willing to travel and teach. Two of Jim’s former fellow parishioners, Anne Collins and Mary Dunn, agreed to ride with Mrs. Sweeney’s son to the Doyle home for a catechism class. In the above-mentioned book we read: “The Doyle ‘fished,’ and when the young people arrived on that memorable Sunday, they found forty-three children assembled in the Doyle grape arbor.”

Mary Dunn helped form three other mission classes in the Cecil vicinity over the next few months. She recruited additional teachers from Pittsburgh, and to Fr. Griffin as well as the two priests now assisting him, it is said that the “mission outreach on the part of these young workers seemed an answer to prayer.” Fr. Griffin saw to their training and throughout these early years helped garner financial support from various organizations.

From 1913 to 1919 the effort that had become known as M CCD followed what became a familiar pattern. Catechists would gather very early in the morning on Sunday at St. Mary of Mercy halls, non-Catholic private homes, motion picture theaters and boxcars, to mention the most unusual. No site was too primitive, too inconvenient or too uncomfortable. No one of faint heart could have withstood the rigors of life for those who made up the ranks of the M CCD.”

By 1920 there were over 35 missions (some urban) and nearly 3,000 Catholics receiving instruction through the M CCD.

The M CCD relied on stewardship to meet its budgetary needs. A formal effort called “Adopt-a-Sunday-School”—the idea of individuals and in some cases groups adopting a specific mission Sunday School—was employed as early as 1921. Also in the early 1920s M CCD catechists engaged in what amounted to special religious education by serving young Catholics both at the Home for Crippled Children and the Blind Institute. Over time, religious instruction for the deaf became more readily available.

It is noteworthy that specific persons were usually designated as fishers in the M CCD movement. Writes James: “Fishing was the preliminary step taken by the Missionary Confraternity of Christian Doctrine in planning and organizing a mission. An experienced fisher would visit a
settlement, conduct a census, determine the number of Catholic families in the area, and obtain as much information as possible about the religious condition of each family. It was common for fishers to find a high incidence of religious ignorance in a district...unbaptized children, invalid marriages, and many families who had not attended Mass or received the sacraments for years. The fisher submitted a written report. In almost every instance, the fisher’s report resulted in the decision to establish a mission.”

As the MCCD grew, it became necessary for some catechists to double as fishers—fishing on a continued basis before classes and often following up with absentee. Also, fishing was not limited to mining areas. Consider Bloomfield, a proudly German and Italian neighborhood slightly northwest of downtown Pittsburgh. “For many years, the Missionary Confraternity fished...in Bloomfield...particularly for attendance at Sunday Mass. Men workers fished on Saturday night for Sunday Mass and Sunday School. The women called for the children on Sunday morning. Sometimes they went into the homes, got the children out of bed, washed and dressed them! They made sure they got to church!”

In the 1950s and 1960s, MCCD underwent changes making it ripe for renewal. The efforts described above had gone so well for so long, that many missions were no longer missions; rather, they were now parishes in their own right. “In the first 25 years of its existence,” writes James “the MCCD supplied the motivation and leadership for the establishment of 27 diocesan parishes.”

So what does an organization do when a plateau is reached and the future seems uncertain? The MCCD merged with the parish Confraternity of Christian Doctrine in a way that made adult education, in the form of catechist formation, a fundamental area of focus. The 1950s saw the beginnings of this process. Catechist formation—helped greatly by collaboration with the women’s religious community Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart—expanded thanks to increasingly well-structured training courses.

Through the 1960s, as scores of new catechists were needed to staff growing parish programs, more structures emerged. Bishop John Wright designated priests to be deanery directors of CCD. Soon after, each deanery was assigned a lay associate director. A corps of master catechists was recruited and formed so that growing numbers of training courses would continue being well staffed. Television programs and radio broadcasts began spreading the Faith through the airwaves. Pastors were encouraged to hire professional religious educators to head parish programs.

Other noteworthy developments in the 1950s and 1960s include enhanced efforts at special religious education and increased use of audio-visual equipment. In 1960, for example, a catechetical program for people with mental retardation was initiated by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. Within two years, nine children with mental retardation celebrated their First Holy Communion—all in their home parishes.

As we move toward closing these reflections on the MCCD specifically, we pause to consider the priestly career of the late Fr. Edward R. Farina. Fr. Farina was taught by MCCD catechists as a boy. As pastor of Christ the King Parish, rather than building a school (there were several Catholic schools in his area), he saw to the construction of a catechetical center; known as the School of Religion, it was a site of faith formation for teens and parents as well as children.

While Fr. Farina acknowledged the great value of Catholic schools, he felt compelled to help develop the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine to its fullest potential. In 1984, to honor four of his brothers who were also priests—and to advance the ministry of catechesis—he endowed the Fathers Farina Fund. Nearly 10% of parishes in the Diocese of Pittsburgh have benefited by having a catechetical administrator pursue further formation as a Farina Fund scholarship recipient.

Recently Mary Downey James offered a few thoughts in retrospect on the MCCD. An enduring impression for James is the fact that so many mission catechists whom she interviewed echoed a resounding theme: they felt privileged to bring Christ to the people in these missions.

Privileged. Privileged to rise before dawn on what was for many the only day off from work for the week. Privileged to travel miles over terrain that often wouldn’t accommodate a motor vehicle. Privileged to put in more than a twelve-hour day nearly every Sunday traveling and teaching—plus time in between these Sundays working on their own formation as catechists.

Along with Mary’s book, several other sources of information on the MCCD are available (many of which she drew from) including a dissertation by Brother Leo Lanham published in 1945 by the Catholic University of America Press. The Missionary Confraternity’s classic approach to evangelization and catechesis still has lessons to teach us all.

Mr. Ogorek is director of the Office of Catechists in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. This article is adapted from his Francis Glenn lecture delivered Oct. 16, 2005.
Book Notes


This book chronicles the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Diocese of Ogdensburg from their beginnings in 1880 through 2002. Western Pennsylvania plays a supporting role. In the early 1900s, the sisters taught at St. Thomas Grade School in Braddock and staffed the new high school there—the first parish high school in the diocese. Because the parish was "literally in the shadow of the Edgar Thompson Steel Works," novices would take turns getting up at 4 a.m. before school to tackle the huge amount of laundry necessitated by the soot and smoke released by their "neighbor." The sisters also taught at St. Brendan’s School in Braddock and later at Corpus Christi in East Liberty.

The sisters left the Pittsburgh area in 1932. Their time spent here would, however, affect community life "up north" for years. Between 1913 and 1932, about half the sisters who entered the community were from the Pittsburgh diocese.

The book is available at LaRoche College bookstore or from the Sisters of Saint Joseph, 1425 Washington St., Watertown, NY 13601.


The current St. Paul Cathedral in Oakland, which is celebrating its centenary year, is actually the diocese’s third. The first two cathedrals, also dedicated to St. Paul, were located in downtown Pittsburgh. For many people, their history is murky. Fr. James W. Garvey’s history sheds much-needed light on those first two mother churches, answering questions about the historical situation of the parish’s founding and the decision to move the cathedral to Oakland. This thought-provoking work is available locally from Kirner’s, the Diocesan Purchasing Commission, the publisher (724-746-1178) and the author.


This latest work on Pittsburgh’s famed “Labor Priest” was authored by a veteran labor journalist and author of the 1988 book _And the Wolf Finally Came_, a dramatic account of the decline of the steel industry, especially in Pittsburgh. The author focuses on three individuals in his latest work: his uncle, U.S. Congressman Harry Davenport; his uncle’s principal union supporter, Tom Quinn; and Msgr. Charles Owen Rice. Their lives clashed over communists in the labor movement. Rice is treated harshly for his efforts to rid unions of communist “fellow-travelers,” which included cooperation with government investigators as the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee pursued Communist Party connections.

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