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Missionaries to the Coal Patches: The MCCD

By Kenneth Ogorek

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 Doyles '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 MCCD 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 MCCD."

By 1920 there were over 35 missions

(some urban) and nearly 3,000 Catholics receiving instruction through the MCCD.

The MCCD 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 MCCD 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 MCCD 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



In a mining town, youngsters gather with catechists. Cover photo: MCCD members assemble before traveling to teach the faith. (Photos courtesy Diocesan Archives)

Church in downtown Pittsburgh. From there—by buses, trains and cars—they fanned out to the remotest corners of the diocese, or in some cases, small urban niches. A long day was spent traveling, praying, setting up, teaching, grabbing a bite to eat, then traveling, praying and singing some more; these are in a sense punctuation marks on pages filled with love, preparation, evangelizing, celebration—simply caring enough to spend time with people who had deep spiritual and physical needs, and who gave so much in return for these MCCD efforts.

A passage from James' book paints a fairly vivid picture: "With great sacrifice of time, with unlimited generosity of effort the lay missionaries went out weekly to teach. Their classes were held in the most undesirable and unlikely places: tents, bedrooms of private homes, cellars, a jail, stables, storerooms, attics, miners'

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 absentees. 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.

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