A Pittsburgh Catholic Men’s Movement

By Mike Aquilina

Anyone tuned to the popular Catholic press has grown accustomed to the intermittent rumblings about a “Catholic men’s movement.” Some organizations have risen up, following the model of Protestant movements like Promise Keepers. All very good. But there’s another model that should not be forgotten, because Catholic—and it’s ours.

The story begins in the depths of the Great Depression.

For most of the country, the Depression conjures up memories of bread lines, soup kitchens, grinding poverty, and all the miseries that accompany economic collapse. But it was, paradoxically, a glorious time for the Diocese of Pittsburgh. It is true that money was tight, and that Catholics suffered as much as anyone else—perhaps more so, since Catholics were drawn disproportionately from the working classes. But the faith itself had never been stronger.

Nothing made the Church more visible than the gigantic Eucharistic Rallies sponsored by the Holy Name Society. An institution since 1911, the parades drew many thousands of men to march in the streets every year.

In 1930, the first year of the Depression, the Holy Name Society rounded up 100,000 men for their Eucharistic Rally—a number equal to something like 10% of the male population of the whole Pittsburgh metropolitan area, Catholic and Protestant.

The Eucharistic Rallies grew to such epic proportions that they moved the secular press to new heights of sensation. Headline writers hauled out the “second-coming” type—the headline type so large that editors reserve it for events comparable in importance to the Second Coming of Christ. Richard J. Lamb, Jr., a writer for the Press, left us this description of the procession in 1936:

Two urchins clung to a woman’s threadbare coat on the fringe of the throng which lined Terrace St. Last night.

The woman, her deep-lined face framed in a black scarf, caught, peasant-fashion, at her throat, cupped a bony hand around the flame of a candle, shielding it from the wind.

In the glow of the candle, her lips moved silently. Now and then she’d rise on tiptoe to catch a glimpse of the religious spectacle beyond that wall of women, lined shoulder to shoulder along the curb—the procession to the Eucharistic rally at Pitt Stadium.

Presently she drew a rosary from a worn purse, kissed the crucifix and made the sign of the cross. The waifs at her side also had candles. Too young to know why they were there, they contented themselves with catching the wax drippings from the candles in their hands and molding them into fantastic patterns.

Continued inside.
Gathered Fragments

Prayers Intoned

Above the murmur rose the sharp voice of a priest:
“Hail Mary, full of grace, the lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women…”

Hardly daring to raise her voice, the woman whispered in broken English:
“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

As she rose again on tiptoe, the full splendor of the occasion was unfolded before her. In abject humility she dropped to her knees in the rain-soaked earth and pressed a gnarled fist to her breast three times. The youngsters looked at their mother, then at each other, and did the same.

All around them, women—and a few men—knelt with lighted candles. They, too, struck their breasts—the Catholic’s outward expression of inward humility.

An Old Ceremony

The solemn pageant being enacted before them was an old one—almost 2000 years old—a procession of the Blessed Sacrament.

Beneath a white and gold canopy borne by priests, walked Most Rev. Hugh C. Boyle, Bishop of Pittsburgh, the folds of his brocaded cape gathered around the radiant gold vessel in his hands. In the glassed center of the vessel was a white wafer of bread—the Consecrated Host which Catholics are taught is the physical and spiritual essence of Jesus Christ, their Lord.

Four thousand altar boys in flowing cassocks and surplices led the procession. Behind them marched almost 600 priests, representative of most of the 444 parishes in the Pittsburgh Diocese.

Holy Name sponsored two Eucharistic Rallies in the 1950s, and they were even bigger and more elaborate. In 1950, a gigantic rally jammed Forbes Field with candle-carrying men. Nine tons of candles had to be provided for them. Three thousand altar boys marched in blocks. About eighty thousand men participated; as many as fifty thousand more couldn’t get in.

But in 1955, the Holy Name Society staged its greatest production yet. A gigantic parade, the biggest in the entire history of the city, began marching past the reviewing stand in front of St. Paul’s at noon.

By eight o’clock that night, the parade was still going. It took nearly nine hours for the whole parade to pass the reviewing stand. Sixty thousand men marched in the parade; another hundred thousand people watched it go by from the sidewalks.

Marchers had come from all over the country; the Cleveland delegation alone—more than five thousand men and twenty horses—took more than half an hour to pass the stand. New York sent more than a thousand, including a large contingent from the New York Police Department.

Bishops and monsignors lined the reviewing stand.

Spiritual successes should never be measured merely by attendance figures. And that is certainly true of Holy Name’s rallies and processions. The real story—and the story that remains to be told—is in the personal conversions worked among Pittsburgh’s men in those particular moments of grace.

Nevertheless, the numbers are impressive, and they are testimony to the “faith of our fathers.”

It is a history that warrants much further research. It is a history from which we have much to learn.

The 1915 procession.
New History Book Sets a Feast from the East

Father Ivan Mina, Ph.D., The Ruthenian Catholic Church, The Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

Reviewed by Anthony P. Joseph, Jr.

"By the 1880's, another people had been added to the rich ethnic mosaic of America, ... they were called Ruthenians, Carpatho-Russians, or Slawisch. ... These newcomers were mostly 'Greek Catholics', i.e. in union with the Pope of Rome, but of the Byzantine or Greek rite and ecclesiastic tradition."

With this introduction, Father Ivan Mina, Ph.D., Archivist of the Ruthenian Archdiocese of Pittsburgh and pastor of Ascension of the Lord Parish begins a very detailed and scholarly approach to deciphering and understanding the intricacies of the Ruthenian Catholic Church. Father Mina divides his work into four sections: Ecclesiastic and Ethnic Description, Historical Sketch, Ruthenian Catholics In The USA, and Signs Of Renewal.

He begins by relating the Church's development in relation to the ethnic and subsequent ecclesiastic history of an evolving story of a people and a Church. He states, "The Ruthenian Catholic Church is the designation reserved by the Vatican since 1960 for the Church that came into union with Rome as a result of the Union of Uzhhorod (1646) .... Before 1960, the Ruthenian was also applied to those Churches that had submitted to Rome result of the Union of Brest (1595-1666), but ... are now know as Ukrainian Catholic or Belarusian Catholic." The ethnicity of the people is outlined with detailed explanation as to ancient and contemporary locations and major ethnic dialects. He divides the people into 3 major groups; Rusiny, Rusnaky and the Rusnaci/Rusnatsi.

In his "Historical Sketch", Father Mina carefully outlines the development of the Ruthenian Church. He traces the Ruthenian ancestry to the Slavic tribes of the 6th and 7th centuries who settled "...both sides of the central Carpathian Range." He goes into detail in relating the various political developments from the Great Moravian Empire, to the Varangian Prince and their Rus' Empire and finally to the Kievan Grand Prince Vladimir.

Father Mina then relates the fascinating details of the historical rise of the Church. Father Mina carefully analyzes the missionary work of Saints Cyril and Methodus, the influence of the monastics and the last days of the Byzantine Empire. He further explains the influence of Orthodoxy and the Protestant Reformation, primarily the Calvinists on the region. Slowly over time a gradual orientation to the Western Roman Church took place culminating with a strong and capable leader, Bishop Joseph DeCamillis. The Bishop published, among other noteworthy works, a catechism.

But the prime religious concern, Orthodoxy, will remain as a constant on the fringes of the Ruthenian Church exerting pressures down to contemporary history.

In Father Mina's description of the Ruthenians in the United States, Father Mina mentions the first Greek Catholics coming from Hungary and Galicia. To administer to these faithful, in 1885, Father John Volyansky arrived from Galicia and established the first Greek Catholic Church in the United States at Shenandoah, Pennsylvania. Following him, other priests, all but one of these priests was married, were to arrive in the United States. To complicate the Greek Church in the United States in relation to the established Latin Church, conflicts arose over the issue of celibacy, with the added problems of ecclesiastic jurisdiction. The Greek Catholic priests recognized jurisdiction from their bishops in Europe. In hoping to resolve the problem, over the next several years, the Vatican sent numerous apostolic visitors to the United States. Finally Bishop Basil was to select Pittsburgh as his residence. But, Bishop Basil was to meet opposition from others and from Orthodoxy in the Pittsburgh area. Eventually after World War II, Saints Cyril and Methodius Seminary was established in Pittsburgh, a diocesan newspaper was started, and the Ruthenian Church grew to where Pittsburgh became an archbishopric.

In his section "Signs of Renewal," Father Mina concludes with the contemporary historical analysis of the Ruthenian Catholic Church, in Eastern Europe and in the United States.

In Father Mina's lucid and carefully detailed work, the reader is given a glimpse of an ancient rite of the Roman Catholic Church. Father Mina's candor in telling of the Ruthenian Catholic Church is intriguing as well as fascinating. For the novice in attempting to understand the "Greek-Byzantine" rite or the astute and trained historian, Father Mina's work is a must read. Father Mina's excellent footnotes provide the beginnings of future research and study on such a fascinating subject, the Ruthenian Catholic Church.

Anthony Joseph is president of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.
New History of the Whitehall Franciscans

A Celebration of Franciscan Spirit, by Deen Leindecker Gimper, Ph.D., is the documented history of the religious congregation of women residing on 33 acres of land in the South Hills of Pittsburgh, and known as the Whitehall Franciscans. The story of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God spans the years between 1922 and 2000 and was compiled by a lay person, a graduate of the former St. Francis Academy. The sisters were administrators and teachers in this first Catholic all-girl high school in the South Hills, recognized for its teaching excellence and situated on their motherhouse grounds.

The influential roles played by the sisters’ Catholic faith and Lithuanian heritage is captured in detail in this 12-chapter book, each chapter featuring a general superior and the accompanying events for her tenure. The congregation was initially formed to serve the Lithuanian immigrants. One chapter is devoted entirely to the Brazil Mission which is now a province with its own motherhouse based in Sao Paulo.

Theological terminology is defined and explained throughout the narrative together with the discussion of social forces which impacted upon the congregation. Photos and numerous references are utilized to substantiate the authenticity and enhance the clarity of the written word. Personal interviews conducted with both community members and lay people augment the primary and secondary sources of information.

Several themes are evident in the text: government, members and formation, religious life, apostolic ministries and temporalities. A comprehensive and extensive appendix contains maps, biographies of the general superiors, a listing of ministries in the United States, Brazil and Lithuania, identification of clergy associated with the establishment and growth of the congregation, and the names of all the women who began their religious lives with the Whitehall Franciscans.

The reader is introduced to the courage, tenacity and religious spirit of the sisters as, together with other religious and laity, they survived many hardships and trials and participated in diverse ministries locally, nationally, and internationally in such areas as education and health care. The book concludes with reflections by the author on the highlights of this phenomenal journey of selfless, dedicated women following the examples of Saints Francis and Clare.

A Celebration of Franciscan Spirit is available, $20 postpaid, from the Franciscan Sisters’ Motherhouse: 412-885-7217.

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