Epiphany in Uptown — 100 Years

By Father James Garvey

To understand the history of Epiphany Parish, it is necessary to review the history of St. Paul Cathedral. St. Paul Cathedral was originally located at the corner of Grant Street and Fifth Avenue (Woods Plan lots #421, 422, 423, 424, Deed Book Volume 1143, P.315). This was prime downtown property, diagonally across the street from the Allegheny County Court House. Ownership of the property and building was transferred from the estate of James O'Hara (DBV #47, P.148-149) to Bishop Francis P. Kenrick, April 25, 1834, when Pittsburgh was still part of the Diocese of Philadelphia. When the Diocese of Pittsburgh was established in August 1843, St. Paul's, located on the most prominent hill in downtown Pittsburgh, became the Cathedral Church in the newly formed Diocese.

The prominent positioning of St. Paul Cathedral on Grant Street meant that it stood above much of the rest of the City. That situation, however, was not always an advantage. Newspaper reports indicated that in 1836 Grant Street was lowered approximately ten feet. In 1848, Grant Street was lowered another seven feet. This unfortunate set of circumstances required that the pastor of St. Paul Cathedral erect a 15-foot wooden stair tower (26 steps of seven inches each) so that the parishioners could gain admittance to the church from Grant Street. Unfortunately there was a devastating fire May 6, 1851, which destroyed the Cathedral building. The Bishop, however, ordered that the cathedral be rebuilt — at much expense — on the same Grant Street site. The newly constructed Cathedral was dedicated June 25, 1855.

The “new” Cathedral building served the needs of the Diocese of Pittsburgh for many years. Unfortunately over the years the Diocese was never able to pay off the oppressive debt associated with rebuilding the cathedral, and the church rectory (where the Bishop lived) on that same property. In the intervening years, the property on Grant Street increased in value significantly. Throughout the closing decade of the 19th century, Bishop Phelan moved slowly and consulted widely before arriving at a decision to sell the Cathedral property. Moreover, Bishop Phelan was sensitive to the feeling of the Catholic community in the matter of the disposition of the most prominent church in the Diocese. Unfortunately, St. Paul's was never successful in paying down its substantial debt. Over a period of several years, Bishop Phelan consulted with the clergy of the Diocese, prominent Catholic citizens, and especially the priests and parishioners of St. Paul Cathedral before arriving at a decision concerning the sale of the Cathedral property. At a meeting held with the parishioners of St. Paul Cathedral April 9, 1901, a resolution was passed that the Bishop was to sell the property for a sum “not less than one million three hundred thousand dollars.”

Bishop Phelan approached the Court of Common Pleas May 31, 1901 (No. 597, June Term, 1901), which issued an order that the property might be sold at private sale. September 28, 1901, Bishop Phelan sold St. Paul Cathedral property at the corner of Grant Street and Fifth Avenue to Henry Clay Frick for $1,325,000. Straightway that deci-

Continued on next page.
These include, Carrara, the purplish-Verona and the deep Numidian.

Fixes and candlesticks, and community Venetian mosaic tympanum of the Old Testament. The marble canopy over the sanctuary was ordered and cut in Pietrasanta, Italy and reconstructed when it was delivered to Epiphany Church. Various marbles are used.

Bronze tabernacle doors, the crucifixes and candlesticks, and communion rail gates were designed by John T. Comes and cast in Europe.

The final Mass at St. Paul Cathedral was celebrated in May 1903. Bishop Richard Phelan, after a lifetime of service to God and the Church, died at St. Paul Orphanage, December 20, 1904. He was buried from Epiphany Church, the pro-cathedral.

Epiphany church was used for daily and Sunday celebrations of Mass and the sacraments by the congregation, but its many appointments were not completed until 1910. The pews, statues, vestments, stations of the cross and various other furnishings from St. Paul Cathedral were transferred to Epiphany. Four larger-than-life statues from the Cathedral are still to be found at Epiphany. The figure of Christ is at the peak of the Church exterior in front, flanked by St. Peter and St. Paul. St. John occupies a favorite spot in the small garden outside the priest's sacristy. The children who had been attending St. Paul Cathedral Grade School, and the Sisters of Mercy who taught them, all transferred to Epiphany School in 1903 — as soon as the new school building was ready for occupancy.

Bishop Phelan appointed Rev. Lawrence O'Connell the first pastor of Epiphany Parish. Fr. O'Connell shepherded his flock with care, and helped to meet the spiritual and temporal needs of his parishioners, and the multi-ethnic peoples of the neighborhood. Fr. O'Connell served as the pastor of Epiphany for 54 years. He experienced both the zenith and the decline of the parish in his own lifetime. In 1903, when Epiphany grade school first opened, the Uptown neighborhood consisted mostly of immigrant Irish families. The Sisters of Mercy welcomed all to the school, and made sure the children learned their catechism as well as reading, writing and arithmetic. At its peak, student enrollment throughout eight grades was nearly 1,200 students. In subsequent years, as the neighborhood changed, newly immigrated families moved in. The Mercy Sisters also welcomed these children, whose parents had come from Italy, Eastern Europe and Lebanon. At one point, 30% of the student body was made up of Syrian Maronite children.

After Fr. O'Connell had accomplished all that was necessary so that the new parish was up and running, he began to construct the Pittsburgh Lyceum opposite the parish church at 110 Washington Place (the site of Chatham Center today). Originally a group of young men from the neighborhood had met in the basement of St. Paul Cathedral; now they had a new building devoted to organized sports and supervised activities for young men. Two well-known boxers trained at the Lyceum: Harry Greb and Billy Conn. Conn challenged Joe Louis for the heavyweight championship. The Lyceum also offered a lending library, a lecture series, and adult education. The Pittsburgh Lyceum offered English as a second language class for newly immigrated families until the City of Pittsburgh took on this responsibility more than a decade later.

Fr. O'Connell had a compassionate love for children. He worked with particular enthusiasm to establish programs that would aid underprivi-
leged children from the city neighborhood that surrounded Epiphany Church. He was instrumental in working with communities of religious women and lay people in opening St. Rita’s Home for Babies, St. Anne’s Day Nursery, and the Raphael Temporary Home for Older Children. He also established Camp O’Connell in Bradford Woods to provide a 'fresh-air camp' experience for needy boys and girls. He played a major role in organizing the Downtown Boys Club (1916), launching the St. Vincent de Paul Society Store (1919), and served as Secretary of the Diocesan Charities Commission from 1914 to 1947. In 1912 Fr. O’Connell was the director of a campaign to raise $200,000 to build the St. Regis Residence for Women on Congress street, behind Epiphany School. St. Regis Residence offered a protective place to live (room & board) for women who came from the countryside in search of employment in the City of Pittsburgh. This service continued until 2000, when the program was ended. Plans by another agency for a program to help meet the needs of low-income women in that building never came to fruition. The parish now awaits proposals for another use of the St. Regis building. Many vocations to the priesthood and religious life came from among the families who attended Epiphany Parish. O’Connell, during the later years of his life, established a scholarship program for the education of seminarians at St. Mary Seminary, Baltimore.

In the early 1900s seven newspapers were printed each day in Pittsburgh. The Catholic printers asked Fr. O’Connell if a Mass could be offered when they finished their shift at 2:30 a.m. Sunday morning. Permission was sought from and granted by Church authorities in Rome, and the 2:30 a.m. Mass was offered each Sunday at Epiphany from 1905 to 1991. In addition to the printers, many couples who were "out on the town," uniformed police and firemen, college students and others frequented this early-morning Mass. The priests from Epiphany Parish also began offering Mass each Sunday at the Allegheny County Jail, a few blocks away.

Beginning in the 19th century and continuing into the 20th Century, Pittsburgh was hailed as one of the primary industrial centers in the nation. The railroad and coal industries fed the steel industry which had grown up along with the Ohio, the Allegheny and the Monogahelia River valleys. Urban planning was a little known science in the early part of the 20th Century. The Pittsburgh region was too busy expanding into an industrial giant to bother planning parks, open spaces, or greenery in the downtown area. However, when Pittsburgh was reinventing itself in the 1950s following World War II, one of the major efforts was the demolition of the mills, factories and warehouses which had grown up and surrounded Fort Pitt in what is now known as The Golden Triangle. In those years, it was difficult to find a grassy spot or a tree downtown. When they cleared away the rubble from the demolished factories, it was a very pleasing site to see the stainless steel Gateway Center office buildings, the State Office Building, and the Hilton Hotel towering over a tree lined grassy park where the begrimed factories had been. Point State Park with a beautiful fountain was situated at the beginning of the Ohio River. It was a first-rate accomplishment among industrial cities in the northeast, and an achievement of which the city fathers and industrial leaders of Pittsburgh could take much pride.

Redevelopment in the area around The Point was an award-winning accomplishment. However, the rules for urban renewal so well practiced in Gateway Center would not transfer as readily to the area known as the Lower Hill. In the late 1950s, the city fathers and industrial and business leaders once again set to work to enlarge and "improve" the Uptown Pittsburgh neighborhoods, so that the City might expand into this area that had been a residential neighborhood for more than a century.

Although it took a number of years to plan, urban renewal in the Uptown-Lower Hill District neighborhoods had a ravaging impact almost overnight. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the neighborhood surrounding Epiphany Parish was bulldozed off the map. In less than six months ten thousand families were relocated. Homes and businesses were torn down, and the rubble was hauled away. No one in living memory remembered seeing so much flat land in the Uptown neighborhood waiting to be developed. The effect was devastating. It was one thing to tear down aging factory or machine-shop buildings as had been done in the Gateway Center. It was much more painful and damaging to the human spirit to displace such a significant number of families in a city neighborhood.

I have not been able to discover research describing how widely the city fathers consulted with Bishop Hugh C. Boyle or Bishop John Dearden concerning the proposed urban planning that would have such a devastating effect on the Uptown neighborhoods. In hindsight, though, I suspect no one in the Church, City or the industrial-business community could have envisioned the frightful effects this particular urban-renewal effort would visit upon the low-income families who peopled the neighborhood. Epiphany Parish, in less than six months, was reduced from 2,200 families to 350 families.
St. Peter's Church, Fernando Street, and other community institutions were closed and demolished. Old streets were relocated, and new streets appeared where none had been before. The infrastructure of the whole neighborhood collapsed almost overnight. Gone were the gas stations, neighborhood grocery stores, drug stores, florist shops, bars and restaurants. Before the demolition was complete, and the new buildings began to rise from the rubble, Epiphany Church, School, Rectory and the St. Regis Building were the only structures remaining from what was once a vital, pulsating multiethnic neighborhood.

For more than 50 years Fr. O'Connell had ministered to thousands and thousands of families in Epiphany Parish. Now he was shocked to witness the dislocation of these same parishioners to other parts of the City and County. It was too much. At age 84 he submitted his resignation to Bishop Dearden, retired in residence, and died in 1959.

Subsequent pastors who served Epiphany Parish with distinction and constancy are: Rev. Daniel A. Gearing, Rev. Daniel H. Brennan, Auxiliary Bishop John B. McDowell (served as pastor for 28 years), Rev. Thomas F. Manion, Rev. Robert E. Spangenberg, C.S.S.P., Rev. E. Daniel Sweeney, and the current pastor Rev. James W. Garvey. Each of these pastors — and the assistant pastors who worked with them — has done his best to serve the families who people a much smaller parish neighborhood in what is now defined a "downtown parish."

The Crosstown Boulevard slices through what was once a vital part of Epiphany Parish. Chatham Center and the Marriott Hotel have grown up across the street from the Church. Opposite the rectory, the Mellon Arena draws crowds for hockey games and other recreational activities. New apartment houses and a few other buildings have also been located within the parish. Each pastor over the years, working with the parishioners, struggled to define and then redefine the role Epiphany parish would play in serving the Catholic community. As we celebrate our 100th Anniversary, that role has become much more clearly defined. Epiphany parish continues to serve the Catholic faithful who live in the neighborhood, the faculty and students at Duquesne University, and the medical staff and personnel at Mercy Hospital. At the same time, we also serve the Catholic faithful who live in the suburbs, and travel to the city for employment or shopping, who want to attend church in downtown Pittsburgh.

Each of the pastors since Fr. O'Connell, in his own way, has undertaken some remodeling and renovation projects to update the parish. Most recently these efforts include painting and spot pointing the exterior of the church, painting the interior of the church, repairing many of the stained glass windows in the church, and remodeling the parish hall and kitchen. Our current project is to raise $180,000.00 to repair the beautiful, but aging, pipe organ that was installed early in the 20th century.

The shape of the future for Epiphany Parish is clear, yet at the same time cloaked in mystery. It is clear that Epiphany Parish continues a long tradition of serving parishioners and others in the wider community by celebrating the sacraments and preaching the Gospel. How that tradition of service will be exercised in the future is a mystery, given the continuing and unknown evolution of the community surrounding Epiphany Church. As the Parish celebrates this Centennial, we look to the past with thanksgiving for all that has been, even as we look to the future with confidence and trust in Jesus Christ for all that is yet to come.

The author of this history, Father James Garvey, is pastor of Epiphany Parish and a longtime member of the board of the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

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