Sister Margaret Carney speaks on Clare of Assisi

On February 6, Sister Margaret Carney spoke to the Society on the research material that she collected for her recent publication on Clare of Assisi. Sister emphasized that Clare was a strong woman in her own right and not just a protege of St. Francis. Sister spoke to a well attended and interested audience.

As for Sister’s background, she was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In Pittsburgh, she graduated from Saint Francis Academy and holds a BS in Education and an MA in Theology from Duquesne University. She received her MA in Franciscan Studies from St. Bonaventure’s University in New York and received her STD from the Pontifical Atheneum Antonianum in Rome in 1988.

Sister’s previous ministry experiences include education in the elementary and secondary levels in Pittsburgh and in Philadelphia. She served as the Associate Vicar for the Religious in the Diocese of Pittsburgh from 1972-1978. She has been a member of the Formation team and General Council of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence God in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She serves currently as the General Superior of her Congregation.

Sister serves as a member of Council of the International Franciscan Conference of the Third Order Regualt and holds membership in the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Franciscan Federation of the USA.

Sister Margaret Carney’s book, The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi and Her Form of Life, was published by the Franciscan Press of Quincy, Illinois in 1993. For more information on how to obtain the book, please write to Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence God, Grove and McRoberts Roads, Pittsburgh, PA 15234.

Brief Overview of Business of the Board

On November 29, 1993, The Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania became officially incorporated. The Society has also obtained its federal tax ID number and has applied for tax exempt status. The Society is now listed in the Kennedy Directory.

As for other Board business, the Board is currently revising the Society’s Constitution. At a recent Board meeting, the Board elected the following officers for the 1994-1996 term: Anthony Joseph, President; John Farmerie, Vice President; Anita Karg, Treasurer; and Kathleen Washy, Secretary.

The 1994 membership drive has been successful. Renewals and new memberships are still being accepted.

There was a good turn out for last October’s Duquesne University History Forum Session, "The Roman Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh: The Last 150 Years", which was cosponsored by the Society. Inside this newsletter there is an abridged version of one of the papers presented.
ACQUAINTANCES OF REV. WILLIAM F. X. O'BRIEN

by Paul Dvorchak

Father William F. X. O'Brien (1779-1832) was the first resident priest assigned to a Roman Catholic congregation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Father O'Brien is not as well-known as other priests of his time, such as Father Demetrius Gallitzin (1770-1840) or his successor, Father Charles Maguire (1770-1833). O'Brien, however, knew important church and civic leaders. This essay will discuss three well-known people with whom he was acquainted. These represent two influential groups in the early American Church: the Roman Catholics of Maryland and the French clergy settling in the United States after fleeing the French Revolution.

Fr. O'Brien served the frontier town of Pittsburgh from 1808 to 1820. Other priests had visited and lived in Pittsburgh beginning with the clergymen who accompanied the French explorers and those who served the soldiers at Fort Duquesne in the middle 1700's. By the time Father O'Brien arrived in 1809, many priests lived in Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania, but none had been assigned by a bishop to take charge of a congregation in Pittsburgh.

First hand accounts of his undertaking can be found in twenty letters of Fr. O'Brien in the archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. They are addressed to four different Archbishops of Baltimore: John Carroll (d.1815), Leonard Neale (d.1817), Ambrose Marechal (d.1828), and James Whitfield (d.1834). These letters provide the source for most of what follows.

The most important clergyman that Fr. O'Brien knew was Archbishop John Carroll, who ordained O'Brien on June 11, 1808. Archbishop Carroll was a native born American appointed as bishop of Baltimore, the first diocese in the United States. Born in 1735, he was a member of an aristocratic colonial family and a cousin of Charles Carroll, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Prior to his consecration as bishop, Fr. Carroll was well-known by the leaders of the American Revolution as he accompanied Benjamin Franklin and others on an unsuccessful mission to ask for French Canadian help in the Revolutionary War. His diocese covered a vast distance, and he had only a small number of priests to serve the growing number of Catholics.

The issue of trusteeism flared up in every major center of Catholicism in this country during Carroll's episcopacy. This controversy forced many members of the early Catholic Church in the United States to answer questions of loyalty, either to the traditions of the Catholic Church or to the newly formed ideals of the young republic. Historians generally applaud Carroll for his leadership in the turbulent early years of the Church in America. He died on December 3, 1815.

The turbulence O'Brien encountered, however, was of a different nature. O'Brien's letters to Carroll do not discuss the important ecclesiastical issues of the day. Fr. O'Brien had a large area to cover on horseback and meager financial resources. The letters of Fr. O'Brien are those of a young missionary priest asking for articles necessary for the liturgy, and advice on questions such as the qualifications for godparents or the morality of dancing. But Fr. O'Brien was aware of Bishop Carroll's power as shown in his asking the bishop to intercede for a sailor impressed by the British navy.

William F.X. O'Brien knew another early American bishop. O'Brien left Pittsburgh in 1820 for reasons of health and a weak constitution according to Fr. Lambing, the first historian of the Diocese of Pittsburgh. From Pittsburgh, Fr. O'Brien lived and worked in Kentucky under Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget, a Sulpician from France who came to this country in the aftermath of the French Revolution. From 1801 to 1809, Flaget taught at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore. As Fr. O'Brien attended the same seminary during that time, he would have known Fr. Flaget. Bishop Flaget was consecrated in 1810 as the Bishop of Bardstown, Kentucky. His diocese was especially large as it extended to the Mississippi River and north to the Great Lakes. Occasionally, Bishop Flaget traveled through Pittsburgh. In 1819 he administered Confirmation to Pittsburgh Catholics. This gave Fr. O'Brien a chance to be reacquainted with the French Bishop. Bishop Flaget's relationship with Fr. O'Brien was especially warm as the bishop referred to him as his 'son' in a letter.
dated Oct. 25, 1829 to the Major Superior of the Carmel in Port Tobacco, Maryland.  

There may have been another reason for O'Brien's departure from Pittsburgh. In two letters from Pittsburgh, 4 he expressed concern for the well-being of his mother. In a letter dated September 17, 1812, Fr. O'Brien mentions that he expected to see Bishop Carroll that fall or winter and hoped he would not have to come back to Pittsburgh because he wished to take care of his mother. The poverty of St. Patrick's, Fr. O'Brien's parish, was such that it could not afford to support both O'Brien and his mother. 5

Fr. O'Brien's mother eventually did move to Kentucky and remained there after Fr. O'Brien left that state in 1824. Furthermore, she was under the care of Bishop Flaget. Fr. O'Brien next moved to Conewago, Pennsylvania until 1827, when he went to Newtown, Maryland for a year. Then Fr. O'Brien became the chaplain at the Carmelite convent at Port Tobacco, Maryland. He continued to serve the Carmelites after they moved to Baltimore in September of 1831. Fr. William F.X. O'Brien died at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore on November 1, 1832 at the age of 54 and was buried in Calvary Cemetery attached to the seminary.

Further evidence of Fr. O'Brien's close relationship with French clergy is in the account of his death and burial in the diary of Fr. Louis Regis Deluol, S.S. who was the superior of St. Mary's Seminary from 1829-1849. This account relates the names of those in attendance at O'Brien's death and the scriptural passage (Ps. 92) on which Deluol preached at the funeral. This diary was written in French. 6

While serving as the chaplain of the Carmel, Fr. O'Brien conducted most of the business for the Sisters. The Sisters' property was contested in a legal suit, and a Catholic lawyer defended and won the case in the Sisters' favor. The lawyer, Roger Brooke Taney (1777-1864) was a descendant of an early Catholic family from Maryland. He later became Andrew Jackson's Attorney General and then the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in 1837. After the case concerning the Carmelites' property was settled, Taney wrote to Fr. O'Brien on Jan. 2, 1830. In this letter, Taney returned the offered fee of $100.00 to the Sisters and asked only for Fr. O'Brien's and the Sisters' prayers. 7

Taney was the second son of a plantation owner who had many slaves. He himself freed and later maintained his freed slaves. Taney has been called one of the most able Supreme Court Chief Justices but will primarily be remembered for writing the majority opinion for the Dred Scot Case of 1857. This decision denied full citizenship to African Americans and permitted slavery in all territories of the United States.

Fr. O'Brien himself was not opposed to slavery. In two of his letters he acts as a middleman in the purchase of a slave by Archbishop Whitfield. He recommended that Whitfield buy the man and mentioned that the selling price was $350.00. 8

The study of the different groups of Catholics who lived and worked in the United States in the early years of the Church is instructive to our understanding of subsequent history. Maryland Catholics and French clergy both had values and concerns dictated by their respective political and social contexts. Fr. William F.X. O'Brien may not be an important historical figure but he is a reflection of the influence of these two groups of early American Catholics.

Notes:

1. Letter to Carroll, May 29, 1811. No. 5W5 Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.


4. Letters to Carroll: 5W2, March 2, 1809 and 5W7 Sept. 17, 1812.


6. A copy of this diary is in the Sulpician Archives in Baltimore. I am indebted to the Archivist, John W. Bowden, S.S. for pertinent passages and translation.

7. Currier, p.179.

8. Letters to Whitfield, 23P8, April 1, 1829 and 23P9, April 11, 1829.
Diocesan History Published
The Diocese of Pittsburgh has recently published a history of the Diocese. Shepherds of the Faith, 1843-1993: A Brief History of the Bishops of the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh, written by Monsignor Francis Glenn is now available for purchase. Contact the Pittsburgh Catholic for more information on how to obtain a copy.

Upcoming Lecture, Fall 1994
Nick Parrendo will be giving a presentation on liturgical art. This lecture is tentatively scheduled for October 1994.

Speakers Bureau
The Board's Speakers Bureau is available to give presentations on various aspects of the history of the Diocese. Please contact the Board of The Catholic Historical Society for more information.

Gathered Fragments
If you have any submissions to the Gathered Fragments newsletter, please submit them to The Catholic Historical Society at Synod Hall.