

THE DOMINICANS IN ZANESVILLE¹

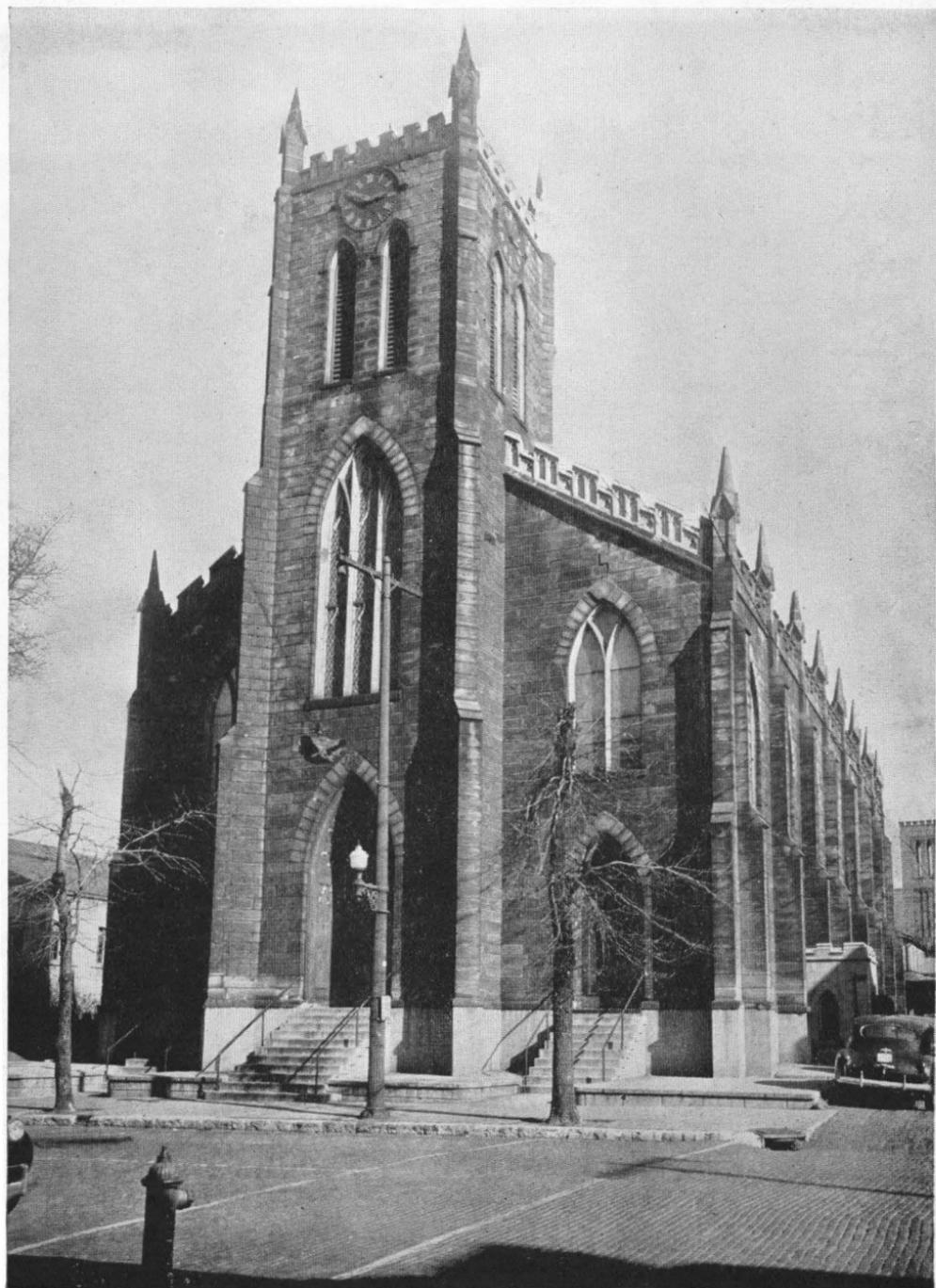


'M WILLING to give something to your church, but I have no money. I have a place two miles down the river where there is good building stone. You can have all you want for your new church." Father C. P. Montgomery, O.P., looked at the speaker. The gift was unexpected, and the giver was a non-Catholic of Quaker descent, John C. Howard. In a few brief sentences he had removed one of the greatest obstacles to the new church Zanesville needed. A larger church was a real necessity, for Catholicism had experienced a tremendous growth in Zanesville since that spring of 1819 when Father Dominic Young, O.P., rode into town and found only three Catholic families without church or priest. He had been most hospitably received by John S. Dugan, proprietor of the Green Tree Tavern. In the second story of this building, located at the northeast corner of Main and Fifth Streets, on a bureau dressed to serve as an altar, the Dominican celebrated the first mass said in Zanesville.

Father Young could not remain, and months would pass between his visits, for he had his own congregation at St. Joseph's in Perry County, Ohio. For the Zanesville Catholics to go there meant a long trip on horseback or carriages over roads far from easy riding. Mr. Dugan had the answer to the problem. He provided a church. In 1820 he purchased the brick warehouse which stood on the northeast corner of Locust Alley and Fifth Street. One story high, fifty feet long and twenty feet wide, it had cost two thousand dollars, but Zanesville now had a church dedicated to the Holy Trinity and its first resident pastor, Father Stephen H. Montgomery, O.P.

Zanesville was still enjoying "growing pains," and soon this first church was too small for the swelling numbers of Catholics. Once again Mr. Dugan was ready. He bought a lot fronting one hundred thirty four feet on Fifth Street at its intersection with Spruce Alley. On this site was built the Church of St. John. A cruciform structure of brick and stone, its nave measured seventy feet in length and forty in width, and it reached to the height of thirty five feet. Father S. H. Montgomery, O.P., worked hard to furnish it and made an extended tour of the East seeking the vestments, altar equipment and

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ST. THOMAS CHURCH, ZANESVILLE, OHIO

other needed appointments. Gifts were soon forthcoming, and on July 2, 1827, the church was dedicated.

Zanesville continued to boom. The Catholic population continued to increase, and the increase brought the recurring problem of expansion. In 1842, Father C. P. Montgomery, O.P., who had relinquished the pastorate of St. John's for the provincialship of St. Joseph's Province, sought to solve the problem which faced his former church. This time, however, the Dominicans could not turn to Mr. Dugan save in prayer. Zanesville's pioneer Catholic benefactor had died soon after providing for St. John's Church. But there were successors to Mr. Dugan, and generous gifts brought the proposed church closer to realization. Mr. Howard made his unexpected but very welcomed offer. Patrick Keeley, an architect in Brooklyn, New York, gave without charge plans for an imposing building of English Gothic. Fortunately, too, at this time a canal was being built near Zanesville, and this provided the necessary quota of workmen. Because the new church was to be on the site of old St. John's, services were conducted on the third floor of the Blocksom building on the northeast corner of Sewer Alley and Main Street during this transition period.

On the seventeenth of March, 1842, the cornerstone of St. Thomas Aquinas' Church was laid. Work progressed so rapidly that in scarcely nine months time the new edifice neared completion, and the parishioners began to speak of it with just pride. A stranger in Zanesville was so impressed that he wrote to the *New York Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register* (January 21, 1843):

"When I reached Zanesville a few days before that great festival (Christmas), as my acquaintances were chiefly among the Catholics, I soon learned from them that the Rev. Fr. Montgomery, with many of his congregation, were busily engaged in making preparations to celebrate Christmas in the new Church; and that all hands that could be collected were under requisition for that purpose. My first visit was therefore to see this monument of religion in the West. Our friends had informed me that their Church excelled any I had yet seen in this country; that our great St. Patrick's and St. Peter's of New York, and St. John's of Philadelphia, would not bear comparison with their church. I thought this a mere boast of imagination or the effect of ardent zeal. You can readily conceive how great was my astonishment when I approached the building to find that they had not over-rated the mag-

nificance of this church, or exaggerated in their description of it . . . I had the happiness of attending the first solemn mass at 5 o'clock (Christmas) . . . this church reminds me of our old Cathedrals of the Gothic Order in Ireland, and especially of that Father Matthew erected some years ago in Cork . . . Its very appearance is almost enough to excite a heavenly and Catholic spirit . . ."

Sixty feet wide and one hundred twenty long, the exterior structure of St. Thomas' Church alone cost forty thousand dollars. Scarcity of money prevented the completion of the interior, and for some years mass was said in the basement of the church. The gift of three thousand dollars from Mr. William Mattingly helped hasten the opening of the upper church. There was some difficulty, too, in plastering the walls, for the first application was of plaster of paris which soon fell to the floor and had to be wheeled away. The second attempt was successful.

In 1850 bulls were received by Father C. P. Montgomery, O.P., appointing him Bishop of Monterey, California, but he asked to be spared the high office. He preferred to remain with his congregation at Zanesville where, one year later on Sunday, December 14, he had the satisfaction of seeing St. Thomas' Church consecrated by Bishop Purcell. Father George A. Wilson, O.P., celebrated the mass with Fathers Francis Cubero, O.P., and John A. Bokel, O.P., assisting him. The Reverend Father W. S. Murphy, S.J., Provincial of the Society of Jesus in Missouri, delivered the sermon. The documents attesting to the consecration of the church were put in a box of pure tin about six inches square and fortified by tape and seal. This was placed in the sepulchre that lay under the long marble altar stone. The Cincinnati *Catholic Telegraph* (December 27, 1851) states: "The weather was intensely cold, but this notwithstanding, the prescriptions of the Pontifical were faithfully complied with."

During all this era of expansion, the Dominicans did not forget to provide for the religious education of the parish children. About 1830 a school was opened in the basement of old St. John's Church. Lack of teaching sisters necessitated the hiring of lay teachers, men for the boys and women for the girls. Later the school was transferred from the church basement to a frame building on the southeast corner of Sixth and Center Streets. It was Zanesville's first Catholic school. In 1853 a two-story brick building was constructed on the lot just opposite the church, and when it was finished in September that year, four Dominican Sisters of the St. Mary of the

Springs community used it both as convent and school. For a while they taught both girls and small boys, but when their rule restricted their efforts to the girls, other teachers were sought for the boys. Two Holy Cross Brothers from Notre Dame, Indiana, came in the fall of 1857 and assumed charge of the boys. During their two-year stay, they lived with the Dominican Fathers. When they left, laymen were again hired. This arrangement lasted until the 1870's when a modification of the Dominican Sisters' rule permitted them to take over the education of both the boys and girls. The Dominican Sisters have ever since supervised St. Thomas' Parochial School, but the old school structure was replaced by a more modern building during the pastorate of the Very Reverend L. F. Kearney, O.P.

As with all churches the wear of years required renovations to be made in St. Thomas from time to time. When Father Kearney became pastor in 1894, he saw that repairs were necessary and he made plans for redecorating the interior of the church. The Retig Brothers of Cincinnati finished the work towards the end of 1897, the same year in which Father Kearney became provincial of St. Joseph's Province. For the twelve years he held this office, he continued to reside in Zanesville. In 1911 he again became pastor of St. Thomas' Church, and once more his energy turned toward improving and beautifying the church property.

Then came St. Thomas' first major disaster. On Sunday, June 16, 1912, a tornado struck the church during the celebration of mass. The steeple, erected during the pastorate of Father James V. Edelen, O.P., was carried away by the terrific wind. A gaping hole was torn in the roof and tons of stone were hurled down upon the early morning worshippers. Three men were killed. The pipe organ was crushed into shapelessness. In a comparatively short time the church was again restored only to be struck by the destructive flood of 1913. Water surrounded all the buildings belonging to the parish, school, church and rectory, but it stopped when it had reached the joists under the first floor of each building. The water was over five feet deep in front of the church while the flood was at its height, and the church could not be used from Wednesday, March 26, to the following Wednesday, April 2. The basement of the church suffered heavily. The floor had to be relaid; the thick mud left by the receding waters had to be removed; and the walls and the woodwork repainted. In 1916 every trace of the extensive damage was removed when Father Kearney had the entire interior redecorated.

Succeeding pastors were equally zealous for the appearance of their church. Major alterations were not called for, but the Domini-

cans were careful to make necessary changes and replacements such as that of the main altar in 1928 during the pastorate of Father Paul Roach, O.P. During this present year, the centenary year of St. Thomas' Church, the Very Reverend L. P. Johannsen, O.P., has made every effort to bring back to old St. Thomas the glistening splendor of its first Christmas.

Zanesville is no longer the little frontier settlement which met the eyes of Father Dominic Young. It is not even the flourishing little town over which the newly-built St. Thomas Church towered. Zanesville now has the rush and rustle of a business center, the noise and smoke of industries, the good and evil which come to every city. Dominicans were there at every phase of its growth, and they have the right to be proud of their achievements. Together with the priests of St. Nicholas parish, also founded in 1842, they have worked energetically to maintain a vigorous Catholicism in Zanesville. Their labors are not forgotten. People in Zanesville still speak of the brilliant and learned oratory of Father Laurence Kearney, whose name is a legend in central Ohio. The unostentatious Father James Aldridge and the kindly Father William Cummings are recalled with affection. For Father Paul Roach there are still prayers of grateful remembrance from those whom he once guided to the Faith. The list could be extended and St. Thomas' history made much more lengthy, but one fact would stand out: St. Thomas' Church has been blessed with good pastors, and St. Thomas' pastors have been likewise blessed with good people.